

Venezuela's Chavez welcomes Russian warships

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Global Research, November 26, 2008

Associated Press 26 November 2008

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

LA GUAIRA, Venezuela - Russian warships sailed into port in Venezuela on Tuesday in a show of strength as Moscow seeks to counter U.S. influence in Latin America. Russia's first such deployment in the Caribbean since the Cold War is timed to coincide with President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Venezuela, the first ever by a Russian president.

Russian sailors dressed in black-and-white uniforms lined up along the bow of the destroyer Admiral Chabanenko as it docked in La Guaira, near Caracas, and Venezuelan troops greeted them with cannons in a 21-gun salute. Two support vessels also docked, and the nuclear-powered cruiser Peter the Great, Russia's largest navy ship, anchored offshore.

Chavez, basking in the support of a powerful ally and traditional U.S. rival, wants Russian help to build a nuclear reactor, invest in oil and natural gas projects and bolster his leftist opposition to U.S. influence in the region.

He also wants weapons — Venezuela has bought more than \$4 billion in Russian arms, including Sukhoi fighter jets, helicopters and 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles, and more deals for Russian tanks or other weaponry may be discussed after Medvedev arrives Wednesday.

Russia's ambitions in Latin America, however, may be checked by global events. Both Venezuela and Russia are feeling the pinch of slumping oil prices, and their ability to be major benefactors for like-minded leaders is in doubt given the pressures of the world's financial crisis.

The deployment of the naval squadron is widely seen as a demonstration of Kremlin anger over the U.S. decision to send warships to deliver aid to Georgia after its battles with Russia, and over U.S. plans for a European missile-defense system.

But U.S. officials mocked the show of force.

"Are they accompanied by tugboats this time?" U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack joked to reporters in Washington. He noted that Russia's navy is but a shadow of its Soviet-era fleet.

"I don't think there's any question about ... who the region looks to in terms of political, economic, diplomatic and as well as military power," McCormack said. "If the Venezuelans and the Russians want to have, you know, a military exercise, that's fine. But we'll obviously be watching it very closely."

When Russia sent two strategic bombers to Venezuela in September, some drew comparisons to the Soviet Union's deployments to Cuba during the Cold War.

But both countries have shown signs of trying to engage President-elect Barack Obama, and Chavez told reporters that it's ludicrous to invoke the Cold War to describe these naval exercises.

"It's not a provocation. It's an exchange between two free countries," Chavez said Monday night.

The ship maneuvers inside Venezuela's economic zone in the eastern Caribbean will begin Dec. 1, enabling sailors to practice reconnaissance, anti-drug patrols, anti-terrorism and search and rescue operations. Rear Adm. Luis Morales said the training, including anti-aircraft exercises with Venezuela's newly bought Sukhoi fighter jets, will not involve live ammunition.

The maneuvers "should be viewed largely as a propaganda exercise," said analyst Anna Gilmour at Jane's Intelligence Review.

"Pragmatic Russian policy suggests that it will content itself with a brief high-profile visit, rather than a longer-term deployment that could cause severe tensions with the U.S., at a time when Russia may be looking to re-engage with the new administration," she said.

Medvedev's tour to Peru, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba was planned before the financial crisis, and Russia must now downsize its ambitions in Latin America because its pockets are no longer so deep, said Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor of Russia in Global Affairs Magazine.

"Russia will have to put off big projects like the construction of a gas pipeline across South America," Lukyanov said. The proposed natural gas pipeline is Chavez's brainchild, a controversial and ambitious plan for which he has explored Russian investment.

But Russia still has an economic interest in selling more weapons and boosting business in Latin America, and Venezuela can help "open the doors," noted Venezuelan political scientist Ricardo Sucre Heredia.

"It's a win-win relationship for the two countries," Sucre said. "Russia gains in terms of its international power and its presence, and Venezuela gains in terms of having an ally."

Associated Press writers Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow, Desmond Butler in Washington and Ian James in Caracas contributed to this report.

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