

Putin Plays his Hand in Venezuela

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President Hugo Chavez is hosting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Friday for meetings that will seal an assortment of lucrative deals – as well as raise some eyebrows in Washington.

Russia, which has been running a marathon of business deal-making this year (Russia secured \$10 billion in energy, nuclear and arms deals in India this month), is now set to strengthen its hand in South America with a trilateral meeting between Vladimir Putin, Bolivian President Evo Morales and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. But the visit may be more noteworthy, perhaps, for the dust it will kick up north of the border.

It is no secret that Washington enjoys less-than-amiable relations with the left-leaning governments of Bolivia and Venezuela, and nowhere is the expression "nature abhors a vacuum" more applicable than in the jungle of geopolitics. So with Moscow searching for new commercial markets and Caracas looking to update its military hardware, relations between Russia and Venezuela were almost inevitable (Even Belarus has managed to profit from US-Venezuela tensions, but more on that later).

"We have found a very reliable partner in Caracas," commented a senior Russian diplomat on the sidelines of the talks. "It is always fascinating when two peoples from separate parts of the planet can see things so similarly."

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin and Venezuelan First Vice-President Elias Jaua held a bilateral meeting in Caracas ahead of a session of the high-level Russian-Venezuelan intergovernmental commission.

The two statesmen discussed expanding cooperation in the energy sphere, industry and mining, agriculture, as well as in other sectors.

"Particular emphasis was made on the possibility that Venezuela may purchase Russian aircraft, in particular the Be-200ChS amphibious aircraft, which is mainly used to guard water surfaces, transport people and cargoes and put out fires," a source in the Russian delegation said, as quoted by Interfax.

In addition to the amphibious craft, the Russian package of proposals includes the An-148 military cargo aircraft as well as maintenance and airfield services since "the issue may involve the sale of 50 units of aircraft," the source said.

During his visit, Putin will also negotiate the final shipment of the last four Russian Mi-17 Hip helicopters out of 38 purchased under a 2006 contract.

Since 2005, Venezuela, South America's top oil exporter and a member of the oil-producing

cartel OPEC, has purchased some \$4 billion worth of Russian weaponry, including fighter aircraft, helicopters and Kalashnikov assault rifles.

However, the relationship between Russia and Venezuela goes beyond just good business opportunities.

Geopolitical Maneuvering

With NATO creeping steadily toward the Russian border, and a US missile shield in Romania looking fait accompli, Moscow is anxious to prove that it is not limited to just issuing complaints about the situation. Indeed, Russia's baby steps in South America have served to expose America's soft superpower underbelly, while underscoring Russia's resurgence on the global stage.

In early March, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a South American tour in an effort to heal the diplomatic wounds that many observers blame on the foreign policy decisions of George W. Bush, whose global war on terror campaign did not sell well south of the border. Although relations seem to be slowly improving with US President Barack Obama at the helm, tensions still exist.

While in Brazil, for example, Clinton's entreaties to Brazilian President Lula da Silva to support sanctions against Iran, which the United States says is pursuing a nuclear weapons program, went nowhere.

"It is imprudent to push Iran against a wall," da Silva replied. "The prudent thing is to establish negotiations."

Clinton, who expressed concern last September about Venezuelan arms purchases and their potential for triggering an arms race in the region, gambled once again in Brazil, hurling gratuitous insults at the government of Hugo Chavez.

"We wish Venezuela were looking more to its south and looking at Brazil and looking at Chile and other models of a successful country," she said. The comment drew more uncomfortable throat-clearing than golf claps considering that Brazil and Venezuela enjoy good relations.

It is important to bear in mind exactly how bad things have gotten between Caracas and Washington. Chavez regularly accuses the United States of imperialism and wanting to invade Venezuela to "steal its oil reserves". Then in September 2006, at his most eccentric, Chavez referred to George W. Bush as "the devil" in a speech to the General Assembly of the UN.

"The devil came here yesterday," Chavez said, referring to Bush, who addressed the world body during its annual meeting. "And it smells of sulfur still today."

Belarus deals itself in

So needless to say, the United States is beginning to wean itself from Venezuelan oil, and just last week President Obama announced plans to open vast expanses of American territory for oil drilling. These developments opened up new prospects for the Belarusian government of Aleksandr Lukashenko, which is attempting to diversify its economy.

Last month, Lukashenko met with Hugo Chavez in Caracas where the two leaders hammered out a deal that sees Venezuela delivering up to 80,000 barrels of crude oil per day to Belarus in return for the Tor M-1 Missile Defense System, which can detect aircraft and cruise missiles, according to military profiles of the system.

The deal comes on the heels of a bitter dispute between Minsk and Moscow at the start of the year over duty-free oil imports.

On Friday, Lukashenko went to pains to assure Moscow that the deal with Caracas was merely Minsk “diversifying its economy.”

“We (with Russia) have no confrontation, it is absolutely unnecessary for us,” he underlined.

According to Lukashenko, Belarus will compete for the Russian market, but “at the same time we will look for other markets.”

Whatever the case may be, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez must certainly be gloating over all of the international attention he has attracted to himself and his country, which has turned out to be a significant player in the game of geopolitics.

Robert Bridge, RT

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