

Russia Arming Venezuela in Anticipation of an Expected U.S. Invasion?

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The Russian Federation and Venezuela on July 27, 2006 have negotiated and approved the sale of 24 aircraft and 53 helicopters—about a \$1 billion (U.S.) deal—to Venezuela, as part of an ongoing landmark event, defying the American threats and demands to halt all weapons transfers and any future deals between Russia and Venezuela. Russia has already supplied and started delivering portions of a 100,000 Kalashnikov automatic rifles ordered by Venezuela and Russian attack helicopters to Venezuela. This deal has further entrenched Russian-Venezuelan cooperation, partnership, and the strategic shift of Russia replacing the United States as the military hardware supplier of Venezuela. The securing of this military hardware agreement between Russia and Venezuela is a sign of the fermenting geo-strategic confrontation or rivalry between the Russia and the United States.

The United States slapped the weapons embargo onto Venezuela referring as justification to the strategic partnerships and alliances of Venezuela with Iran and Cuba. The U.S. weapons embargo on Venezuela started in May, 2006, and has including the U.S. putting pressure on Spain and Brazil to halt their agreements to supply military equipment to Venezuela. Venezuela has responded that the U.S. embargo is illegitimate in violation of previous agreements between Venezuela and the United States, and based on a premise for an American offensive against Venezuela.

Venezuelan Army and Naval aircraft are almost all totally American manufactured, while the Venezuelan Air Force, with the most significant air fleet out of the three forces, had 177 U.S. manufactured aircraft out of a total fleet of 277 aircraft prior to the major military purchases from Russia. Venezuela has traditionally purchased its weaponry from the United States. Venezuela in 2005, alone, purchased about \$34 (U.S.) million worth of U.S. military equipment. It is significant to note that just \$30.5 (U.S.) million of these purchases were C-130 cargo plane spare parts.

The American embargo seems to be a deliberate tactic that is part of strategy to disarm Venezuela, a notable source of fossil fuels and an influential state in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Venezuelan military's F-5 Freedom Fighters, F-16 Falcons, C-130 cargo planes and American attack helicopters would for all practical purposes eventually be neutralized. That is why Venezuela immediately sought other defence manufacturers, which ultimately resulted in Russia replacing the United States in equipping the Venezuelan military.

Possible Transfer of Venezuelan F-16 Falcon Squadron to Iran

What is interesting is that in response to the U.S. weapons embargo on Venezuela, the

Venezuelan government has declared that it is considering transferring Venezuela's F-16 Falcon squadron and other U.S. manufactured military aircraft to the Iranian military. The United States blasted the Venezuelan idea saying that based on the 1982 sale and deal between the United States and Venezuela for the F-16 Falcons Venezuela could not sell the planes to a third party, in this case Iran, without U.S. approval, which the United States would definitely not give.

The Venezuelan government maintained that the sale of the F-16 Falcon squadron is perfectly possible because the United States had violated and breached the contract by not honouring the obligation of supplying Venezuela the aircraft parts that Venezuela has paid for and as agreed upon purchase by Venezuela and the United States.

The sale has been deemed by Western analysts to give no significant tactical benefit to Iran because of the fact that Iran is also under an American embargo and has no access to the spare parts needed to keep the aircraft operational, but then again the Iranian military has been reported to have successfully reengineered old American military hardware and is highly secretive. President Hugo Chavez is due in Tehran, Iran and Venezuela might just sell portions of their U.S. manufactured aircraft that are being replaced with Russian manufactured aircraft to Iran.

The Venezuelan government has rapidly been shifting all its links and reliance away from the United States, all but the export of oil to the thirsting U.S. market which has also been outlined as an eventual strategic goal for Venezuela too. Deals have been negotiated for industrial and energy projects with both Russia and Iran. The rerouting of Venezuelan oil from the United States to China has been envisioned as part of the ultimate goal of Venezuela as a member of a solidifying energy alliance between Venezuela, Russia, and Iran. This is why the United States has tagged President Hugo Chavez and the Venezuelan government as a threat to American energy security. As a result relations between Venezuela and the United States have been deteriorating.

During February, 2005 the Venezuelan government publicly accused the U.S. government of plotting to assassinate President Chavez, something that the Venezuelan media has reported that the U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela admitted the U.S. government was aware of, but not a party too.

In Russia, during his July meetings, the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez triumphantly declared to the media that when the American blockade was imposed to weaken Venezuela for eventual U.S. invasion the Russian government had offered support to Venezuela. President Chavez and the Venezuelan government have clearly articulated that they are preparing the Venezuelan military to repel U.S. aggression, which is a widely held belief throughout Venezuela and neighboring Columbia. In Argentina, during the Summit of the Americas, President Chavez even told thousands of sympathetic Latin American demonstrators that U.S. plans to invade Venezuela in are in full preparation.

A statement released on March 8, 2005 and signed by almost 400 Venezuelan journalists accused the U.S. government and media of a campaign to prepare the basis for a U.S. military attack on Venezuela to control its natural resources, namely oil. Tensions were further heightened when Venezuela detected the secret presence of "US Marines, along with military planes and amphibious vehicles" on the Caribbean island of Curacao, part of the Dutch Antilles, just 75 km from the Venezuelan mainland during March, 2006, which the U.S. Ambassador in Caracas apologized for as a "lack of communication" between the

Venezuelan and American governments.

Since the start of 2005, Venezuela has laid the strategic foundations of a new national security doctrine and an expanded military capability that is based on the core assumption that the greatest threat to Venezuelan sovereignty is the United States. Venezuela has also created a military reserve program that is projected to mobilize 2.6 million citizens in the defence of Venezuela from an American attack.

The Venezuelan national security doctrine, much like the Cuban national security doctrine, is primarily designed to oppose the anticipated U.S. military invasion is an asymmetrical war. Besides the expected U.S. military invasion, the Venezuelan national security doctrine has been drafted to meet a U.S. contrived war with Colombia, and internal armed insurgency sponsored by the United States. A mutual defence pact with Cuba has also been integrated into the Venezuelan national security doctrine and Venezuela has created special police, military, and elite paramilitary groups that operate independently from the regular command of the Venezuelan military.

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