
Chavez, ex-USSR : a new axis?

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Russian Challenge: Moscow's \$1 billion sale of top-flight military aircraft to Venezuela's erratic dictator isn't just business. It's unfriendly to the U.S. and a sign of a revived Cold War.

There isn't any doubt Russia's \$1 billion contract to sell Venezuela 30 Sukhoi jet aircraft and 33 helicopters will be trouble.

Hugo Chavez's malice toward the U.S. is growing. He's now loudly broadcasting it as he tours the world to drum up support for a seat on the U.N. Security Council, wooing potential allies by promising to counter the U.S.

His latest recruit was Belarus, where he signed an "anti-U.S. pact" Monday with this Russian satellite, praising Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, who admits to having a soft spot for Stalin. "Our countries must keep their hands at the ready on the sword," Chavez said.

Now he's signed a deal in Moscow for some of Russia's most advanced aircraft.

The 30 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 fighters are comparable to U.S. F-15Es, not just in high-speed flight and performance, but in one area where the U.S. has consistently trumped the Russians — electronics and avionics. They are among the best in Russia's arsenal.

These aircraft can do a number of things that Venezuela has never had a need for, such as long-distance flights, land warfare and sea operations. They can fly long distances with a large array of bombs and missiles, and operate at night and in bad weather.

While these new aircraft don't have Russian-made missile warheads (yet), and still can be countered by U.S. stealth flight technology, they are likely to be used to menace Venezuela's U.S.-allied neighbors, like Colombia and the Netherlands Antilles, both of which are already familiar with Chavez's threats.

"Su-30s are intimidators," said Joe Katzman, editor in chief of Defense Industry Daily. "They are used for strikes and for establishing dominance. The military question is always whether you can follow that up."

Meanwhile, of the 33 new armored day-night helicopters for Chavez, 20 are Mi-17V-5 assault/transport choppers, and 10 are Mi-35M2 Pinana armored attack helicopters — the successors to the Russian Hinds used in Afghanistan. Three are MI-26Ts, supergiant transport copters.

All are perfect for internal repression against dissent and against "color revolutions" (read: the Orange, Denim, and probable future Venezuelan and Cuban colored-coded democratic revolutions), the very idea of which Chavez slammed in Belarus this week.

This Russian aircraft purchase represents a nasty new level in the continuing confrontation between Chavez and the U.S. Venezuela is just 1,400 miles from Miami. So Chavez's military aircraft menace us, threaten our allies, undercut emerging democracy movements, and, knowing what we know about the mind of Chavez, are more likely to escalate into something, than mellow out into a non-problem.

Why Russian President Vladimir Putin would do this to us, given all the considerations the G-8, the West, and the U.S. have shown to Russia in the wake of its transition from communism leaves us aghast, and ought to change our perceptions. But that is hard to do, given the difficulty of reading the mind of Putin.

On the one hand, it's likely to be all about money. Russia has little use for military aircraft right now, and for that reason needs foreign buyers to keep its assembly lines open. The \$1 billion deal is no ordinary deal for Russia, and for that reason, is looked on as a lifesaver by Moscow.

But Putin also seeks to project Russia's power, and he resents the growing democracy movements on Russia's periphery " in U.S.-supported countries like Georgia, Ukraine and Belarus " just as Russia cracks down.

His move to sell advanced military aircraft to Venezuela on our periphery is a message to Washington to stop supporting democracy revolutions, or he'll retaliate, using dodgy actors like Chavez, whom Putin's spokesman yesterday called "a key partner." It's a dangerous trend.

"He's building a nuclear reactor for Iran," said Katzman. "Do you think he is going to stop at fighter planes for Venezuela?" We wonder the same thing.
