



Alarm over Chavez's Military Buildup

The Venezuelan President's show of force on Colombia's border has heightened U.S. concerns about his escalating arms purchases from Russia

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While Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez likes to boast that his revolution is constructing a new socialist man, he isn't neglecting the country's soldiers whose support is essential to his rule. Over the last three years, Chavez has spent more than \$4 billion on jet fighters, attack helicopters, and rifles. And he is poised to spend billions more later this year on Russian-made submarines and air defense systems.

Chvez's growing military clout was no more apparent than in last week's confrontation with Colombia over the death of a rebel leader. The strike by Colombian forces that killed Raul Reyes, the No. 2 man in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC], took place inside the Ecuadorean border. But it was Chavez who immediately escalated the conflict by sending nine battalions of men, plus armor and military jets, to his country's frontier with Colombia. Colombia countered with accusations that a computer belonging to Reyes revealed Chavez had sent \$300 million to the FARC.

Saber Rattling on the Border

A summit of Latin American Presidents in the Dominican Republic managed to defuse the confrontation within days. But Chavez's quick deployment of force in a dispute that didn't directly involve him fanned fears that Venezuela's leader is bent on changing the region's military balance as he accelerates his socialist revolution. Chavez's reliance on Russian weaponry is also adding Washington-Moscow's rivalry to the mix, further escalating tensions.

Chvez's military mobilization helped push oil prices to record highs, as traders feared the conflict could spill over to oil fields in Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. As the three countries sparred last week, closing oil prices rose more than \$3, to \$105.15 a barrel, on Mar. 7, up from \$101.84 a barrel on Feb. 29. Venezuela supplies about 1.4 million barrels of oil to the U.S. daily -- about 11% of American oil imports. Colombia and Ecuador export a total of 331,000 barrels daily to the U.S.

Since 2005, Chavez has bought 24 Sukhoi fighter jets, more than four dozen military helicopters, and 100,000 AK-47 assault rifles from Russia. Later this year, he is expected to purchase up to nine diesel submarines and anti-aircraft systems when he visits Moscow.

Military Spending Irks Washington

In the process, Chavez has made his country Latin America's largest arms purchaser and has become Russia's second-largest arms customer [after Algeria] during the 2005-2007 period. Chavez has said that the country is seeking to diversify its arms suppliers, breaking its dependence on U.S. companies.

"Chvez's military spending raises the ante," says Ray Walser, an analyst with the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. "It raises fears that he could use those purchases against his neighbors."

The U.S. imposed an arms embargo on Venezuela two years ago. Washington also scuttled a Venezuelan arms deal with Brazil in 2005 and with Spain in 2006 because the planes and frigates involved used U.S. technology. "You have to remember that Chavez has only turned to Russia because of the U.S. arms embargo," says Julia Buxton, a professor at the University of Bradford in England, who has authored a book about Venezuela. "He is trying to make up an arms deficit" that has been exacerbated by the U.S. arming neighboring Colombia in its battle against the FARC, she says.

Chvez says his country's military purchases and greater reliance on Russia are needed to guard against a possible invasion by the U.S. His fears of U.S. intervention have grown since an unsuccessful coup attempt in 2002 that Chavez claims had U.S. support. The U.S. has repeatedly said it has no plans to invade Venezuela or seek Chavez's replacement. A 2006 study by the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency said Venezuela's arms buildup was aimed at undermining U.S. influence in the region while attracting countries to Chavez's brand of populist socialism.

There is also a domestic component to Chavez's military purchases, says Mark Joyce, Americas security analyst at London-based Jane's Information Group. The military was instrumental in turning back the 2002 coup, and continues to play a political role in the government, with many former officers leading ministries, state

agencies, and state companies. "Chvez is buying a lot of toys for his [military] people to keep them on his side," says Joyce.

But those purchases continue to alarm his neighbors, including Brazil, Colombia, and Guyana. "Brazil has increased its military budget by 50%," after Chvez's buildup, says Rebecca Barrett, an analyst with Newton [Conn.]-based Forecast International, a security and military consultant. Other countries could follow suit, she says.

Small-Arms Sales Loom Large

Unexpectedly, it's not Chvez's big-ticket items that cause the most concern. The weapon that could have the most impact on the region's security is the AK-47, say analysts. Chvez said he purchased the rifles to rearm his army as well as his civilian guard. But as part of the AK-47 purchase, Russia agreed to help Venezuela build a new rifle factory in the central industrial city of Maracay. Some analysts claim that the factory's output could eventually make its way to rebel groups throughout the region, including the FARC.

"The AK-47 is the weapon of choice for mayhem in the region," says Walser. "Venezuela wants to arm its civilian reserve, but given corruption and crime you could see a seepage of weapons."

That could lead to additional conflicts, similar to last week's contretemps. Chvez said on Mar. 9 that he would restore full diplomatic relations with Colombia and promised to lift a trade embargo as well. Venezuela already began recalling troops sent to the border. But Ecuador, which also broke ties with Bogot, has said it isn't ready to reestablish them just yet.

"For now, tensions will remain under the surface," says Buxton. "There are underlying antagonisms that will continue to fester." Chief among them is Colombia's civil war, and Chvez's belief that neighboring countries have "a regional role to play." Colombian President Alvaro Uribe says the FARC is a terrorist organization and that the conflict is strictly a Colombian matter.

Despite Chvez's military buildup, Venezuela's military pales in comparison to Colombia's. The Colombian military outmans Venezuela's armed forces by nearly 2 to 1, excluding Venezuela's civilian reserve.

The Colombian army is also battle-tested, thanks to U.S. training and four decades of battling the FARC, whereas Venezuela's military has only seen limited action, chiefly against irregular forces on the Colombian border. Venezuela's only edge is its air force, but the Sukhoi fighter aircraft are still being integrated and "flight crews still being trained," says Joyce.

Popularity Decline

"We want to end all regional conflicts," Chvez said on Mar. 7 after reaching agreement with Uribe and Ecuador's President Rafael Correa to end the dispute peacefully. "We want peace."

Not all Venezuelans are convinced. Many are apprehensive of Chvez's military ambitions at a time when domestic problems, such as crime, inflation, and food shortages remain pressing. El Nacional reported that Chvez's popularity fell 18%, after the mobilization of troops to the border, according to a private poll undertaken by the government.

"I don't know what Chvez is doing, but we never had these problems, these military problems before," says Jose Hernandez, whose son was sent to the border as part of an armored battalion. "I don't want my son to be put in danger because our President is crazy."

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