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## The Petty Politics of Venezuela's Arms Purchases

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The White House has long been warning that the leftist government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez represents a destabilizing force in Latin America. In recent months Washington appears to have expanded its assessment of Chavez's threat to the region, and has moved to undermine arms deals that "could contribute," according to the State Department, to military as well as ideological destabilization.

Last week, the Bush administration denied Spain the required export licenses to sell 12 transport and maritime surveillance planes containing U.S. technology to Venezuela. This follows a decision in October by Israel, under U.S. pressure, to refuse to upgrade U.S.-built F-16 fighter jets owned by the Venezuelan Air Force. In the weeks ahead, it is expected that the U.S. will block Brazil's attempts to sell its Super Tucano aircraft to the Andean nation, again denying export licenses for U.S. components contained in the aircraft.

There is frustration among U.S. allies over Washington's action. Spanish officials calculate that the contract with Venezuela, which includes four coastal patrol ships and four corvettes, would create work for nearly 1,000 people in Spain's struggling shipyards. Brazil stands to lose up to \$120 million if the U.S. quashes its deal with Venezuela. (Spain and Brazil still have the option to seek non-U.S. components, but only at considerable cost and delay.)

Spain and Brazil insist that the equipment they want to sell Venezuela would not destabilize the region. "We do not believe Venezuela represents a threat to anyone," said Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim last week.

Some military analysts agree with the Spanish and Brazilian assessments. "What's being procured right now isn't offensive," said Tom Baranauskas, a Latin America analyst for Forecast International Inc., a defense market-research firm. The mix of ships and air transport would give Venezuelans only the capability to respond to border infiltration, a real problem especially along its 1,400-mile border with Colombia. The small, turboprop Brazilian Super Tucano aircraft is useful to counter internal insurgencies, Baranauskas said, but not to launch an attack against another nation.

Washington's broad justification for disrupting these arms sales to Venezuela seems a bit hypocritical. After all, Washington continues its own military sales to the Andean nation, albeit at significantly reduced levels (\$8 million in 2004, down from an average of \$20 million annually at the end of the 1990s). It hasn't opposed military sales in general to Venezuela and in no way has it called for an all-out arms embargo. Also, the United States continues to purchase up to 15 percent of its oil from Venezuela, providing the Chavez government with more resources for military spending than either Spain or Brazil.

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The Bush administration would not comment on the record about why considers Venezuela's rearmament "destabilizing." One senior official, under the condition of anonymity, said that the blockage of the sales needs to be viewed in the larger context of Chavez's pursuits to restructure Venezuela's armed forces.

Last September, Chavez signed a new law, the Ley Organica de la Fuerza Armada Nacional, which makes preservation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela the military's mission. While Chavez describes the new armed forces as "anti-imperialistic and anti-colonialist," the law creates two new military branches, a military reserve and a territorial guard, which would report directly to the president. These forces would enlist, train and arm up to 2.8 million Venezuelans in preparation "for local resistance operations against any internal or external aggression."

These militias are clearly not the kind of forces that could lead a military attack against a neighboring nation. But they are nonetheless worthy of concern. Particularly troubling, say military analysts, is the kind of role they would play internally. In following Cuba's steps, these forces could become an instrument to further consolidate Chavez's power, control internal opposition and undermine the professional military.

Chavez insists that this is a mere "reinforcement" of Venezuela's armed forces. As part of that reinforcement, Chavez purchased from Russia last year 100,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles, the first of which should begin arriving in March.

There are indeed good reasons to be concerned about Chavez's security strategy. But Washington's attempts to derail the Spanish and Brazilian transactions come off as petty, suggesting that what's really at stake here is the triumph of one country's political goals over the financial calculations of its allies.

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