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Chávez, Venezuela, and Russia: A New Cuban Missile Crisis?

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez continues to pursue a course of regional provocation aimed at inflaming relations between the U.S. and Venezuela.

On Sunday, September 7, Chávez announced that Russian and Venezuelan warships would hold joint maneuvers in late 2008. On Wednesday, September 10, he welcomed the arrival of two Russian Tupolev-160 strategic bombers to a Venezuelan airfield, evoking memories of earlier U.S.–Russian showdowns. On Thursday, as Americans observed the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Chávez expelled the U.S. ambassador, Patrick Duddy, claiming the U.S. was backing a coup attempt against him. Duddy's expulsion was also a gesture of solidarity from Chávez to his ally Bolivian President Evo Morales, who faces growing protests and internal divisions and expelled U.S. ambassador Philipp Goldberg the previous day.

Together, these actions are a clear and ominous reflection of a rapidly deteriorating U.S. relationship with Chávez and his ally in Bolivia. Sadly, Russia—once a partner in the fight against radical terrorism—appears ready to seek advantage in the U.S.–Venezuela rift.

A New Cuban Missile Crisis? Although the press and a handful of analysts drew parallels between current U.S.–Venezuela tensions and the era of Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro, the actions of September 2008 are clearly not a repeat of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 or even of the Central American crisis of 1979–1990. There is no nuclear threat, no Cold War, and no clear-cut, ideological conflict such as existed in 1962.

However, the arrival of Russian bombers, fleet maneuvers, and the frequent sales of Russian military hardware to Venezuela reflect Moscow's unwelcome readiness to trigger memories of the “Bear in the Backyard” and the decade-long struggle to contain Communism in the Western Hemisphere. Such provocative actions pressure Washington to either respond in kind by raising the ante or by demonstrating passivity and inaction.

Thus far, the Kremlin has been careful to skirt potential “red lines” that might trigger an international crisis. Instead, the Kremlin's actions appear calculated to provide a relatively low-cost distraction in response to U.S. support for Georgia, a strategy designed to rattle the U.S. and entice Chávez, thereby drawing attention away from the Caucasus and other European security issues.

But Russia also appears to view Venezuela as a lucrative weapons market, an energy partner, a potential recipient of domestic security assistance, a possible location for electronic and intelligence collection, and a platform for expanded influence in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Subsequently, the U.S. now faces a dilemma: What actions in the past might have been sufficient

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to trigger a major international crisis today requires prudence and caution.

What Do We Know About Chávez? The current deterioration of relations between the U.S. and Venezuela reveals much about the nature of how Hugo Chávez operates on the national and international level and why he poses a difficult and long-term challenge to U.S. policymakers.

A Dangerous Concentration of Power. For the Venezuelan people, it is a great misfortune that the nation's fate has been seized by a single individual. While elected by democratic majorities, Chávez has governed in an increasingly undemocratic manner. He is also choosing to act irresponsibly on the international stage. Chávez harbors an ideological, conspiratorial view of the world that increasingly inclines him to acts of belligerence and paranoia, manifesting a style of leadership Andres Oppenheimer of *The Miami Herald* has termed “narcissistic-Leninist.” It is safe to say that no other current Latin American leader wields more executive power and faces fewer institutional and psychological constraints than Chávez.

Power Rather Than the People's Interest. The appearance of Russian bombers and warships belies an essential myth of the Chávez regime: that his primary concern is making life better for Venezuela's disadvantaged or defending the gains of his social programs. Chávez's turn to Russia—like his previous support for Colombian guerrillas—is unpopular with the Venezuelan people and underscores a personal ambition to change Venezuela's role from responsible regional stakeholder to that of an aggressive, roguish player on the international stage. It also once more reflects Chávez's growing penchant for a diplomacy of threat, surprise, machismo, and brinkmanship. There must be serious concern regarding the direction Chávez intends to pursue and Washington should view his threats and actions with grave concern.

Intimidating the Opposition. By playing the anti-U.S. card, Chávez seeks to flame nationalist fervor in advance of the November 23 provincial and municipal elections. Following the loss in the constitutional reform referendum last December 2, Chávez fears the appearance of any electoral set-

back. Nonetheless, his domestic problems continue to mount. From electrical blackouts to rising crime, to food shortages and mounting inflation, there appears to be growing disenchantment and disillusionment with the Chávez regime at home. Yet by creating a sense of constant crisis and permanent threat, Chávez hopes that nationalism will prevail over normalcy and that Venezuelans will overlook the corruption and mismanagement of the regime. A sense of constant threat is also an excellent tool for isolating and attacking the opposition on national security grounds.

Chávez's Security Dilemma. Chávez asserts that the U.S. harbors hostile intentions toward his regime. He argues that given the opportunity, the U.S. will undertake to topple his regime either indirectly—through coup-plotting and covert operations—or overtly through an invasion. Chávez therefore justifies certain actions as necessary preparations for self-defense: acquiring advanced armaments, creating militias capable of quelling internal opposition and waging asymmetrical warfare, developing internal intelligence and surveillance bodies, and establishing cadres of potential combatants loyal not to the nation but to him personally and to the revolutionary regime. By taking steps domestically and internationally that advance these objectives and by seeking the support of Russia and Iran, Chávez fuels increased opposition inside Venezuela and hostility from the U.S. and other responsible powers. International polarization is the tiger Chávez rides and dares not dismount.

Rewriting the Rules of Hemispheric Security. Chávez's recent support for Russia's use of military force and actions aimed at dismembering Georgia places in serious doubt the sincerity of Chávez's commitment to the basic cornerstones of peace and security in the Western Hemisphere. Respect for national sovereignty, non-intervention, and the peaceful settlement of disputes all go out the window when Chávez aligns with the Russians.

What the U.S. Should Do? Chávez's provocative turn to Russia and the expulsion of the U.S. ambassador on a flimsy pretext are affronts that will further poison U.S.-Venezuelan relations. The U.S. should respond in the following ways:

- The Administration should proceed in reducing to a minimum the number of Venezuelan diplomats and officials allowed to operate in the U.S.;
- The Administration should take action encouraging regional and international friends to speak directly and frankly with Chávez regarding a pattern of international behavior that is irresponsible and provocative;
- The U.S. should encourage the Europeans, recipients of much of the cocaine being shipped through Venezuela, to apply pressure on Chávez to moderate his behavior, press Venezuela to cooperate on counter-drug activities, and increase aid to Latin America;
- The U.S. presidential candidates and congressional leadership should make it clear that the next Administration will find it hard to engage in normal relations with Venezuela if Chávez persists in baiting the present Administration and proceeds further with the establishment of Russian bases or intelligence facilities in Venezuela;
- The Administration should continue to direct intelligence, law enforcement, and counter-drug assets to closely monitor illicit and illegal activities in Venezuela—from drug trafficking and money-laundering to regime corruption; and
- The Administration should work with Congress and non-governmental organizations to step up assistance to civil society and pro-democracy

groups in Venezuela and press for vigorous international monitoring of the November 23 state and municipal elections.

Venezuela: America's Greatest Challenge. Like his iconic mentor, Fidel Castro, Chávez thrives on mounting tensions and confrontation with the U.S. It is through confrontation that he attains political identity and larger-than-merited international standing. Like Fidel Castro, Chávez aspires to build and lead an anti-U.S., anti-Western coalition. Unlike Castro, however, Chávez is in possession of significant petroleum power and has varied sources of international support. There is danger that Chávez, like Castro, will invite Russia to serve as a guarantor of Venezuela's security and subsequently draw Russia, either willingly or unwillingly, into additional confrontations with the U.S.

At present, Venezuela represents the single most difficult diplomatic and security challenge facing the U.S. in the immediate future. How the U.S. chooses to deal with this challenge will say much about the direction the next Administration will take as it shapes its policy toward America's neighbors in the hemisphere.

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