

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2082  
September 26, 2008

## Putin's Navy, Chávez's Ambition, and the Caribbean Adventure

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Almost half a century after the Cuban missile crisis, the Russian navy is coming to the Americas. While the mood in Washington is far from panicked, neither is it mirthful. There is a sense of discomfort and dissatisfaction with the voyage of the Russian flotilla and concern about where U.S.–Russian and hemispheric relations are headed.

In the coming weeks, media attention will focus on the passage of the Russian squadron into Caribbean waters, where in November it will conduct joint exercises with the Venezuelan navy. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez extols growing military ties with Russia as a means to escape from under the thumb of U.S. hegemony and to build a multi-polar world. Subsequently, one can count on Chávez to maximize the publicity value of the Russian fleet's presence in American waters and to continue flaunting his anti-American agenda and growing connections with Russia. Incidentally, state and municipal elections will take place on November 23 in Venezuela. For the Russians, the naval maneuvers appear to be a form of payback for U.S. support for the democratic nation of Georgia and for the presence of U.S. warships in the Black Sea.

**Showing the Russian Flag (Again).** On September 22, four surface warships departed from Russia's Northern Fleet home base in Severomorsk for the 15,000-mile journey to the warm waters of the Caribbean. The fleet is led by the nuclear-powered guided missile battle cruiser *Pyotr Velikiy* (Peter the Great). When fully armed, it is a formidable warship able to carry at least 400 missiles and anti-submarine

warfare weapons, including 20 P-700 Granit (SS-N-19 "Shipwreck," according to NATO), which are heavy supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles with a maximum range of 300 nautical miles. The SS-N-19 can be armed with either a 750-kilogram conventional or a 500-kiloton nuclear warhead. The battle cruiser can carry three helicopters and has an endurance of 60 days and a maximum speed of 32 knots.

Sailing with the battle cruiser is a destroyer, the *Admiral Chabanenko*, whose main armament consists of eight supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles of the P-270 Moskit (SS-N-22 "Sunburn") type with ranges of approximately 120 kilometers and capable of carrying either conventional or nuclear warheads.

This Russian naval force is accompanied by two support ships and may be soon joined by a Russian patrol ship from its Baltic Fleet.

Russian officials claim the joint maneuvers were planned at least a month before the Russian invasion of Georgia and have only defensive and deterrent missions. Yet to drive home the point of tighter Russian–Venezuelan military relations, Chávez met with Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev September 25–26 in Russia, winning a promise of a \$1 billion credit for arms purchases, deepened

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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energy cooperation, and, potentially, “peaceful” nuclear cooperation. This new deal comes on top of multi-billion-dollar arms commitments agreed to in July.

**No Panic in the Pentagon.** The Russian naval exercises in Caribbean waters come on the heels of the recent deployment of two TU-160 Russian strategic bombers—escorted by NATO fighter jets—to Venezuela. While the temporary presence of this naval force in the Caribbean constitutes a symbolic challenge to the U.S. traditional naval hegemony in the region, the Pentagon understands that the effort to fly the Russian flag in the Caribbean is more gesture than strategy, more symbolism than substance. However, Russia is likely to pursue a permanent naval base in Venezuela and revive an electronic intelligence collection facility at Lourdes, Cuba.

U.S. military leaders, notably Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have recently tried to downplay tensions between the U.S. and Russian militaries. Admiral Mullen told the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board on September 22 that it is in the best long-term interest of both countries to eventually resume military exercises and visits. The dispatch of the Russian fleet, however, is not being interpreted as a conciliatory gesture.

**U.S. Southern Command, the Fourth Fleet, and the Caribbean.** Current U.S. maritime strategy looks to working with international partners as the basis for global maritime security. It is employing naval forces to build confidence and trust among nations through collective maritime security efforts that focus on common threats and mutual interests. Toward these ends, in July, the U.S. re-established the Fourth Fleet.

The establishment of the Fourth Fleet highlights the importance of the Caribbean region to the U.S. and is contributing to security and stability through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Southern Command’s focus on engagement, investment, and partnership with countries underscores the United States’ shared interests and lasting commitment to the region.

For the past six months, however, Chávez, Fidel Castro, and others have equated this minor realignment of U.S. naval forces in the Caribbean—the

standing up of the Fourth Fleet—with a renewed plan for Latin American interventions; even land-locked Bolivia’s Evo Morales railed against “the fourth fleet of intervention.” Chávez and his ilk obtain nationalist mileage and unflagging media coverage when they warn about U.S. efforts to destabilize or invade their countries. Gringo-bashing remains a crudely transparent tool for personal aggrandizement and creating polarized, fear-ridden societies like in Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, or Venezuela.

Yet for all the media hoopla, which has rapidly subsided, the reestablishment of the Fourth Fleet hardly constituted aggressive military posturing. Rather, it involved the creation of a new two-star admiral position, re-assignment of less than 100 mainly planning and administrative personnel, and no increase in warships beyond those already assigned to the fleet’s home harbor at Mayport, Florida.

Chávez and others continue to cling to old geopolitical expressions rarely used in Washington. For instance, Admiral James Stavridis, commander of U.S. Southern Command, notes that the Caribbean, along with the Gulf of Mexico, is not our “back yard” but a “shared home.” Indeed, the Caribbean is an international maritime space vital to the economic health and vitality of the U.S. and 23 other sovereign nations, large and small, that border it. Over its waters flow the life substances of modern global economies: manufactures, energy products, food stuffs, and tourists valued in the trillions of dollars. Approximately 6 million barrels of oil enter the U.S. through the Gulf of Mexico every day. The security challenges are significant but have not—at least until now—involved confrontations between rival navies. The real security challenges include:

- Preventing illicit maritime activity;
- Combating narcotics trafficking;
- Preventing transnational terrorism;
- Dealing with illegal mass migration; and
- Developing responses to natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

The mission of Southern Command and a forward-looking interagency, military-civilian strategy is to use a mix of “soft” and “hard” power to meet these 21st century threats.

**Meeting Geopolitical and Transnational Challenges.** The approach of the Russian squadron is not a cause for undue concern. It is, nonetheless, emblematic of the growing complexity of the challenges—both geopolitical and transnational—the U.S. faces closer to home in vital Caribbean waters. The dispatch of the Russia squadron is a throwback to an age of non-cooperative power rivalries and zero-sum global confrontation.

Subsequently, the White House, Pentagon, and Congress need to do the following:

- Remain vigilant and monitor closely the return of Russian military assets to the Western Hemisphere.
- Consider a bipartisan response to the creation or reestablishment of permanent Russian bases or intelligence facilities in Venezuela, Nicaragua, or Cuba.

- Redouble U.S. diplomatic efforts to work with Brazil, Chile, and others to avoid injecting a competitive arms race and a hostile military presence into South America.

Congress specifically should do the following:

- Lend greater attention to the Caribbean and to the resources and program for our vital “Third Border.”
- Cement permanent ties with friendly Caribbean countries such as Colombia and Panama by approving long-term free trade agreements before the Russian fleet returns home.

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