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Something Brewing in Venezuela

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Addressing a regional diplomatic-military problem is made all the more complicated when the region is not at the forefront of U.S. global strategic interests. Such a region simply does not get the attention that it deserves. I fear that may be what is happening now with South America in general and Venezuela in particular.

On May 15, 2006, the U.S. State Department announced the initiation of an arms embargo against Venezuela because it was not cooperating with U.S. counterterrorism efforts. While the focal point of U.S. foreign policy during 2006 was Iraq, the actions taken by Venezuela, which caused the embargo, did not self correct. Unfortunately, and logically, dialog between the U.S. and Venezuela deteriorated. Currently, the U.S. focus has shifted to Afghanistan and the political decisions being made by the Venezuelan leadership continue to further exacerbate U.S.-Venezuelan foreign relations.

Yet this regional problem in South America is tied to the U.S. focus in the Middle East—primarily to the country that sits right between Iraq and Afghanistan—Iran. Since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005, Iran has inaugurated six new South American embassies in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay, adding to Iran's preexisting embassies in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela. Some analysts propose that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has encouraged this Iranian expansion. Indeed, Iranian officials have signed many economic and political agreements with Chávez, and Iran has invested in Venezuelan industry.

Two years ago, weekly flights from Iran began arriving in Caracas with rather lax controls, which caused U.S. officials to raise objections. The U.S. Treasury put sanctions on an Iranian-owned bank, which maintains an office in Caracas, which allegedly helped Iran avoid sanctions on its nuclear program. In addition, at least one group on the U.S. terrorism-sponsor list, the Iranian-backed group Hezbollah, raises funds in South America. Chávez is flirting just a little too much with Iran. His willingness to create closer ties with Iran does not bode well for future U.S.-Venezuelan dialog. Chávez's silencing of his political adversaries and pushing to become dominant in South America is one thing, but trying to score political alliances across the Atlantic with Iran is another.

When I read articles about such developments I wonder if we as U.S. citizens still

believe in the basic tenets of the Monroe Doctrine. If clever, one would say: Yeah we do, but it does not apply – Monroe made it a point that he did not want European governments to interfere with states in the Americas. Regardless of where the foreign interference comes from, the point is this: Chávez continues to make agreements with Iran, Russia, and China. Chávez stated on September 16, 2009, that Venezuela signed a 3-year \$16 billion investment deal with China to raise oil output by several hundred thousand barrels per day (bpd) in Venezuela's Orinoco belt. Chavez also stated that the new agreement, in conjunction with a deal struck with Russia, would raise output by 900,000 bpd.

But the deals concern more than just oil and industry investments. On December 7, 2009, Chávez stated that Venezuela has received thousands of Russian-made missiles and rocket launchers as part of his government's military preparations for a possible armed conflict with Colombia. Chávez went on to argue that Colombia and the U.S. are plotting a military offensive against Venezuela and that he was acquiring more weapons as a precaution. He also said that Russian tanks, including T-72s would be arriving to strengthen his armored divisions. Venezuela has bought more than \$4 billion worth of Russian military equipment since 2005. This includes 24 Sukhoi fighter jets and dozens of attack helicopters. To facilitate the sales, Russia opened a \$2.2 billion credit line for Chávez to purchase more arms.

Now I do not want to posit that the sky is falling and that Venezuela is becoming a major military threat to the United States in our own back yard. Venezuela has a long way to go before it catches up with Brazil's defense expenditures. Chávez and company have an even longer way to go before it could match the might of the U.S. military but Venezuela could certainly make a lot of trouble for us if it starts a major war in the region. It would undoubtedly result in U.S. intervention at some level. If that level of intervention would involve a significant number of U.S. forces to be deployed to South America then that would have a significant impact on our global strategy, especially in light of our refocused effort on Afghanistan to include the commitment for increased force levels there.

The arms embargo against Venezuela does not seem to be as effective as intended. Venezuela is buying weapons from Russia and threatening war with Colombia. It is reasonable to assume that the U.S. will not lift the arms embargo for many reasons. A whole of government approach is needed to address the regional diplomatic-military problem. But until diplomatic channels can start making headway with dialog, deterrence to war is needed. Active and visible deterrence however would lead to even fewer dialogs and the cycle would continue to deteriorate. Perhaps the U.S. should reconsider the efficacy of the embargo.

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