



Russian Bombers in Venezuela Raise Cold War 2.0 Fears Across Latin America

Frida Ghitis | Thursday, Dec. 20, 2018

Last week, the Maiquetia airport outside Caracas was the site of a remarkable event. On Monday, one after another, a series of Russian military aircraft landed in Venezuela. Most notably, the flock included

(<https://www.apnews.com/8d26f489590041f9b7cac480b0276b10>) two

nuclear-capable, supersonic Tu-160 “White Swan” bombers, along with a passenger plane reportedly bringing about 100 Russian military personnel, and a large cargo plane possibly delivering military equipment.

Just a few days earlier, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro had met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and received promises of a \$6 billion aid package. Now, Putin was using Venezuela to send a powerful message to Washington. For Maduro, concerned with his regime’s survival, that message was just as useful.

Some three decades after the Cold War faded away, the engines of a new Cold War could be heard roaring back into Latin America.

Moscow and Caracas both made sure the images of friendship and military cooperation were widely distributed, first with video of the welcoming ceremonies (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tWWXJkWNwo>) for the Russians. Then, later in the week, the bombers, accompanied by Venezuelan military jets, staged a 10-hour-long flight over the Caribbean, at times only minutes from U.S. shores. Russia’s Defense Ministry released a video (<https://www.nbcnews.com/video/russian-tu-160-strategic-bombers-fly-from-venezuela-over-caribbean-sea-1396869699910>) it claimed showed the Russian jets on their Caribbean tour, calling it a training mission.

Russia was bearing its teeth, reminding everyone, especially the United States, that even if the bipolar world is an old chapter in the history books, Moscow retains its nuclear capability and its capacity to bring it all the way to the Americas, even while President Donald Trump is talking about withdrawing the U.S.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, greets Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro at the Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow, Russia, Dec. 5, 2018 (pool photo by Maxim Shemetov via AP Images).

from key Cold War-era nuclear disarmament treaties.

The events turned a new page in the growing tensions between Russia and the West, reviving distressing memories of how the Cold War roiled Latin America with devastating proxy battles.

Colombia, Venezuela's neighbor and political adversary, reacted with restraint that did not conceal its concerns. President Ivan Duque characterized the Russian military exercises as "unfriendly" and urged the entire continent to remain "on alert (https://noticias.caracoltv.com/jscroll_view_entity/node/189066/full).” At the same time, Duque denied, again, Maduro's claim that Colombia intends to launch military action to overthrow the "dictatorship" in Caracas.

Maduro has repeatedly claimed there is an international plot against him. Just last week, during the Russian military deployment, he told state television in Venezuela that the U.S., along with Colombia and Brazil, was planning to assassinate him. In Brazil, which like Colombia is struggling to handle a surge of refugees triggered by Venezuela's economic collapse, President-elect Jair Bolsonaro has spoken in much more muscular terms about ending the Maduro regime. But in his first television interview, Bolsonaro softened his stance (<http://en.mercopress.com/2018/10/30/bolsonaro-pledges-to-help-the-venezuelan-people-end-the-dictatorship-but-through-peaceful-means>), saying "there will be no intervention in Caracas, it will be through peaceful means."

From Washington, the response to Moscow's show of force was swift, and at least some of it very public. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo excoriated what he described, in a Twitter post (<https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1072324063551463424>), as "two corrupt governments squandering public funds, and squelching liberty and freedom while their people suffer." On Wednesday, the White House said U.S. officials spoke with the Russians, who said the deployment would end on Friday.

The Russian bomber flights are further evidence of the United States' loss of strategic depth in the Americas.

As promised, the planes left that day, followed by a flurry of affectionate messages from Venezuelan government officials. Caracas released video of the departing planes, and Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez tweeted his thanks (<https://twitter.com/vladimirpadrino/status/1073551337932156928>) to Russia, boasting that the two countries will continue building a "productive and vigorous team."

Not surprisingly, NATO was well aware of the Russian flights before they landed in Venezuela. According

to Moscow, Norwegian F-18 fighter jets shadowed the bombers during part of their 6,200-mile flight from Russia.

It is unclear whether the bombers carried weapons, nuclear or conventional, but their presence was another reminder that Russia's military might, once viewed as hopelessly degraded, can no longer be dismissed. To be sure, Moscow's military capabilities still pale in comparison with the West's. But merely by his willingness to use his military, Putin has turned it into a force that shapes facts on the ground, as is evident in Syria and Ukraine. And the particular equipment on display in Venezuela, the so-called White Swans (<https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/12/10/russia-sends-2-nuclear-capable-bombers-to-venezuela/>), are formidable machines of war, capable of flying at twice the speed of sound and carrying cruise missiles with a range of more than 3,400 miles.

For now, there is no evidence that Moscow plans to build permanent bases in Venezuela, although Russian media suggests (<https://www.reuters.com/article/media-russia-eyes-venezuela-base-for-air/media-russia-eyes-venezuela-base-for-aircraft-nezavisimaya-gazeta-idUSL8N1YH1KC>) the idea has been under discussion. The Venezuelan Constitution bans foreign military installations, but the promise of continued and close cooperation is apparent. And, in fact, if Maduro decided he wants the bases, he would not find it very difficult to obtain a legal path to change or bypass the constitutional prohibition. It's a safe bet that military cooperation between the two will continue, with all the risks it entails, including accidental miscalculation by any of the many countries concerned about escalation.

The relationship between Venezuela and Russia, two deeply isolated countries, is mutually beneficial. With its economy in a tailspin, Caracas needs Moscow to keep its head above water. After borrowing heavily from Moscow and using its oil output as collateral, it has little to offer Russia in return, except its strategic location to leverage Putin's geopolitical ambitions. Allowing Russia to deepen its presence in the region has the added advantage of making Maduro's embattled regime more secure.

For the U.S., this is further evidence of its loss of strategic depth in the Americas. In a warning about the pitfalls of the Trump administration's foreign policy, former Vice President Joe Biden recently pointed to Latin America (<https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/joe-biden-western-hemisphere-needs-us-leadership>). Trump, Biden said, is not only creating animosity toward the U.S. with his rhetoric about refugees, migrants and minorities, but he is also disengaging, creating a vacuum that America's foes are eager to fill. Biden noted that China and Russia, which are both deepening their ties in Latin America, "do not invest in democratic institutions or good governance." American leadership, he added, is necessary to advance the interests of both the U.S. and its Latin American friends.

The presence of Russian bombers in Venezuela and the Caribbean last week offered a stark reminder of the stakes.

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