

Dreams of a different world

Arms and the tyrants.



Putin finds a customer for his missiles – EPA

After a two-week tour that included stops in Libya, Algeria, Syria, Iran, Turkmenistan, Belarus and Russia, where he placed orders for tanks and missiles, Hugo Chávez this week got what he seemed to be seeking all along: the attention of the United States. Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state, worried that Venezuela's weapons' purchases might trigger an "arms race" in Latin America, and her spokesman described Mr Chávez's actions as a "serious challenge to stability".

Nowadays Mr Chávez's foreign policy gives top priority—outside Latin America—to forging an anti-American political alliance with Iran, Syria, Belarus and Russia. Mr Chávez told *Le Figaro*, a French newspaper, that he had clinched a deal on nuclear co-operation with his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In response, France's foreign minister reminded Venezuela that a United Nations resolution forbids Iran exporting material from its controversial nuclear programme, of which Mr Chávez is a supporter.

Robert Morgenthau, Manhattan's veteran district attorney, told an audience in Washington, DC, earlier this month that Venezuela's alliance with Iran was a direct threat to American interests. Bank accounts in Andorra, supposedly belonging to people close to Mr Chávez, have been frozen at the request of the United States Treasury, reportedly because of suspicions of links to terrorism.

But the more immediately worrying development may be Venezuela's arms build-up. Mr Chávez has already spent at least \$4.4 billion on Russian fighter jets, military helicopters and rifles. This month he said he had ordered 92 tanks and anti-aircraft missiles using a \$2.2 billion loan from Russia. Press reports say three submarines may follow.

The Venezuelan army's tanks are in poor shape: the president was said to be shocked last year when he ordered them to the Colombian border only to find that few completed the journey, according to a foreign diplomat. The missiles seem to be a hasty response to an agreement last month under which Colombia gave the United States facilities at seven bases for anti-drug operations. Mr Chávez chose to see this as a threat. The missile batteries would make it "very difficult for foreign aircraft to come and bomb us", he said. But his own buys will in turn alarm Colombia.

In Moscow Mr Chávez played up his claim that Russia and Venezuela were “strategic allies”, and followed the Kremlin in recognising the independence of the enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, carved from Georgia last year by Russian troops. But Russia’s leaders seem to see Mr Chávez primarily as a useful customer for their arms industry.

Mr Chávez offers his allies oil and gas. He promised Iran 20,000 barrels a day of petrol, even though Venezuela’s refineries are struggling to supply the local market. He granted Russia’s national energy consortium a block in the Orinoco heavy-oil belt. On the way home he dropped in on Spain’s leaders just as Repsol, a Spanish company, announced the discovery of a big natural-gas field in Venezuelan waters.

Closer to home, Mr Chávez’s plans have come unstuck. His application to join the Mercosur trade block has stalled in Brazil’s Senate. His anti-American alliance, called ALBA, lost a member with the coup in Honduras in June. This week he once again failed to obtain an explicit condemnation of Colombia’s base agreement with the United States from Unasur, the Union of South American Nations.

Government policy documents suggest that Mr Chávez’s aim is to stir up troubles for the United States in many places at once, eventually bringing about the collapse of what he calls “the empire”. Most of the regimes he is cultivating in this enterprise are marked by rigged elections, media censorship, the criminalisation of dissent and leaders for life. Is that the future of Venezuela?

DREAMS of a different world. **The Economist**, New York, Sept. 17th 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 25 set. 2009.

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