

# Executive Memorandum

No. 1010  
September 6, 2006



Published by The Heritage Foundation

## Countering Hugo Chávez's Anti-U.S. Arms Alliance

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has embarked on a military buildup, to counter alleged U.S. plans to invade his country, and has recently visited Russia, Iran, China, Syria, and other countries to finalize purchases and lobby for a seat on the U.N. Security Council. Chavez's aggressive policies could endanger U.S. allies in Latin America and a major source of U.S. oil imports.

Like Fidel Castro in 1961, Chávez is acquiring Russian assault rifles, combat aircraft, and possibly surface-to-air missiles, and he shares a hegemonic and anti-American international agenda with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Unlike Castro, he is not dependent on a sponsor state and can finance his own adventures with booming state petroleum sales.

Because Chávez has no limits on acquiring or transferring arms, U.S. policymakers should strengthen regional alliances to prevent aggression, sanction Chávez in international forums, and press suppliers like Russia to withhold sales of offensive weapons systems.

**The New Castro?** Venezuela's current arms buildup resembles events in the Caribbean in 1958, when Fidel Castro wrote a guerrilla companion that his destiny was to wage war against the United States. In 1960, Cuba began to receive Soviet weapons shipments, including light bombers, MiG jet fighters, SA-2 surface-to-air missiles, and finally nuclear-tipped SS-4 medium-range bal-

listic missiles, which provoked a U.S.–Soviet showdown in 1962.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when Cuba and the Soviet Union tried to establish satellite regimes in Africa and Central America, they armed, among others, Nicaragua's Sandinista revolutionaries and El Salvador's Farabundo Martí Liberation Front.

The United States thwarted those plans by backing a Central American transition to democracy.

Mentored by Castro, Chávez is keenly aware of prior defeats and how to avoid them. Though freely elected, he has replaced Venezuela's checks and balances with a crony congress, silenced critics

with draconian media laws, and placed the state oil company under his thumb as head of the National Oil Council. Unbridled by popular will or economic sense, Chávez wants to block U.S. influence and become a power unto himself—picking up where Castro left off.

**Courting Outside Partners.** Soon after his election in 1998, Chávez began to curtail 50 years of

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- Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is on an arms-buying binge.
  - His goal is to intimidate neighboring countries and harden his grip on Venezuela's people.
  - The United States must strengthen its hemispheric neighbors to avoid future conflict.
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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/em1010.fgm](http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/em1010.fgm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies  
of the  
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis  
Institute for International 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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U.S.–Venezuelan military cooperation. Finally, in 2004, his government asked the U.S. military mission to leave Venezuela’s armed forces headquarters in Caracas. Anti-drug operations and training of Venezuelan pilots in U.S.-supplied F-16 fighters ceased. Shortly thereafter, Venezuela began to seek arms from Russia. The Bush Administration suspended arms sales in May 2006, and Spain and Sweden are withholding weapons with U.S. components.

Chávez has signed contracts worth \$3 billion for 24–30 military airplanes and more than 50 helicopters, has agreed to buy some 100,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles to arm a new reserve force, and reportedly is seeking short-range surface-to-air missiles. During the last week of July 2006, he was in Moscow to finalize the purchase of the Su-30 supersonic fighter-bombers and Mi-35 assault helicopters. He also signed an agreement to purchase a Kalashnikov weapons and munitions plant.

In Belarus, Chávez announced a strategic alliance with President Alexander Lukashenko to keep “hands at the ready on the sword” against imperialism. Iranian President Ahmadinejad awarded him a medal and promised collaboration on developing new oil fields. In China, Chávez pledged to shift more petroleum exports to Beijing. Meanwhile, ties with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il could facilitate the acquisition of intermediate-range missiles.

Venezuela is replacing some military equipment that has fallen into disrepair, but setting up a Russian weapons plant and striking alliances with state sponsors of terrorism (Iran, Cuba, and North Korea) is alarming. Chávez already allows Colombian rebels to resupply in Venezuela and funds like-minded Bolivarian movements in neighboring countries. Venezuelan Kalashnikovs could help them go from street marches to armed attacks. The Su-30 will be Latin America’s most advanced attack aircraft. With North Korean ballistic missiles, Venezuela could threaten neighbors and the United States, and a gelling global oil alliance could limit U.S. imports at a critical moment.

**Planning for the Worst.** Latin America has only begun to turn the corner toward democratic governance, stable markets, and peaceful relations with neighbors. Chávez hopes to use guns and rhetoric

to restore Castro’s revolutionary agenda. In response, U.S. leaders should:

- **Speak softly.** Washington should maintain its subdued response to Chávez’s fiery rhetoric to deny him attention and justification for his war plans while quietly boosting intelligence collection.
- **Strengthen ties with friendly neighbors.** To secure borders and skies and to enhance early warning capabilities, security cooperation must be more comprehensive than the current focus on counternarcotics. Congress should approve pending free trade pacts with Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama to reinforce neighboring market economies.
- **Deny Venezuela a rotating seat on the U.N. Security Council.** U.S. diplomats should redouble global efforts to explain why peaceful, democratic Guatemala is a better choice.
- **Limit Russian arms sales to bad actors.** The U.S. government should prevent the Kremlin from destabilizing strategic regions through weapons sales. It should specify carrots, such as not objecting to most transactions, and sticks like restricting U.S. technology transfers to Russia if it sends arms to belligerent states like Venezuela and Iran.
- **Develop a contingency plan.** If Chavez becomes belligerent, the U.S. will need to compensate for oil imports from Venezuela.

**Conclusion.** By reaching out to Russia and Iran, Hugo Chávez threatens U.S. allies and vital interests. His new military muscle portends another decade of bloodshed, misery, and lost economic opportunity in Latin America. America and its allies need to be ready to confront those plans—probably sooner rather than later.

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