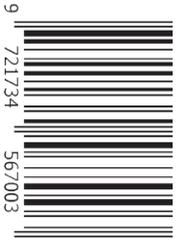


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COMMAND LIVE NEWS NETWORK



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The Headlines of Today. The Battles of Tomorrow.

Est - 2016

A 21st century Cuban Missile Crisis



Sikorsky UH-60L Black Hawk "Arpía", Colombian Air Force.

Flushed with success after its military adventurism in Syria, could Moscow's next move be establishing a nuclear bomber airbase in the US's backyard?

Venezuela

One of the last communist states and once one of the richest countries in the world thanks to its immense oil, Venezuela has seen

major unrest in recent years as due to rampant hyperinflation, corruption and a worsening economic crisis. Taking over from President Victor Chavez, who died in 2013, was Nicolás Maduro, who has ruthlessly cracked down on dissent and public opposition.

Venezuela's military forces operate a mix of Western and

Russian equipment, with its air force early model F-16As and the latest Sukhoi Su-30MK2s. It has also procured aircraft from China in the form of Y-8 transports and K-8 trainers with the proceeds from its immense oil revenues. Its navy, also funded by lucrative oil revenues, operates small but modern vessels sourced from Europe, with German-built

submarines, Italian frigates and Spanish offshore patrol vessels.

Despite the country's descent into a pariah state thanks to its increasingly authoritarian regime, Caracas can draw on one powerful friend, in the form of Russia.

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Colombia

Meanwhile Colombia is faced with the situation of a highly unstable neighbour, with an increasing risk

that Venezuela could slide into civil war, with wider ramifications for regional security in South America. This is particularly

ironic for Colombia, which with US assistance, has fought a bitter war against narco-guerrillas, finally signing a peace deal with

FARC rebels in 2016 after almost 50 years of low-intensity conflict. Having achieved a rare historical win by an established government against a guerrilla opponent, Colombia is thus nervous about fresh instability spilling over its borders from Venezuela.

The country has benefited from US support, training and assistance in fighting the 'War on Drugs' by stemming the distribution of drugs on America's streets at source – a conflict that has evolved to include battle 'narco-guerrillas'. Colombia's equipment includes air platforms such as the A-29 Super Tucano, armed versions of the UH-60 Blackhawk and the ScanEagle UAV. It even operates a gunship version of the Basler BT-67, a turboprop conversion of the iconic DC-3.

However, despite its high military spending compared to others in the regional, for a high-intensity war against a peer state, it, in common with other South American nations lacks the latest cutting-edge weapon systems. Its front-line fighter aircraft, for example is the Kfir C2, an Israeli update of the Dassault's Mirage V - that first flew in 1973.

Colombia's navy meanwhile features German-built frigates and submarines, as well as number of riverine patrol and 'mothership' gunboats to support inland COIN and counter-drug operations. However it has ventured further afield and has taken part in anti-piracy patrols in the Horn of Africa under NATO/EU command in 2015.

All in all, this means that while Colombia's military is one of the most battle-hardened and experienced forces in South America, it is orientated towards counter-insurgency and anti-drug cartel operations, than on full-scale regional conflict. With the US having been a major ally in the 'war on drugs', Colombia would likely draw on Washington's goodwill and military support if threatened by an external threat to its security.

A Russian base in the Caribbean

This balance of power, though could soon change. Moscow's deployment in Syria, though not



The border between Colombia and Venezuela.

“The latest news that the US intends to withdraw its forces from Syria, is thus a tacit admission that Russia has ‘won’ this particular geopolitical wrestling match.”



Venezuela welcomes Russian bombers in support for Maduro.

concluded, has been successful in reasserting Russian influence. In particular, Moscow had seen the US-led regime change of Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 as being examples of the the west overthrowing Russian allies, and riding roughshod over UN wishes. In reversing the course of the Syrian Civil War by its support to Assad’s regime, Moscow has thus boosted its position considerably, both in domestic and on the international stage.

The latest news that the US intends to withdraw its forces from Syria, is thus a tacit admission that Russia has ‘won’ this particular geopolitical wrestling match. Assad is now secure and Putin has reinvigorated Russia’s position in global affairs. As an extra bonus, Syria has also acted as a live-fire testing ground for the latest Russian weapon systems, such as cruise missiles, carrier-based aircraft and even stealth fighters.



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Further to the west, Russia has made it clear that it sees Venezuela as another key ally to bolster against the US and NATO. In late December 2018, Russia conducted long-range flights, sending a pair of Tu-160 nuclear-capable strategic bombers to the the capital, Caracas for a four-day visit, which also included An-124 and Il-62 support aircraft. This was the third such visit since 2008 with the bombers flying 10-hour flights from their base in Russia.

Ostensibly long-range training flights, these were also designed to send a message to Washington about rethinking any intervention in the deteriorating Venezuelan political situation. The latest visit comes as US President Donald Trump

was hinting that military options were on the table and that Washington may throw its weight and recognise a challenger to President Maduro. The regime already has accused the US of being behind the economic crisis and that Washington was plotting a coup.

Cuban Missile Crisis 2.0

Russian bomber flights to the Caribbean themselves are nothing new and Tu-95 Bears regularly made visits to the the USSR’s close ally of Cuba, during the Cold War. These operated from the island as temporary detachments to support Soviet submarine forces off the eastern coast of the US.



Russian Tupolev Tu-160.



A starboard bow view of the Venezuelan frigates *General Salom* (F 25) and the *Mariscal Sucre* (F 21) underway. The ships are transporting Venezuelan officials.

However, it was also in Cuba, in 1962, when Russian intermediate nuclear missiles were secretly deployed in the US's own backyard, that brought the superpowers to the closest to Armageddon – with a US naval blockade leading to a

tense stand-off. In that instance, Moscow blinked, withdrew its missiles and the world breathed a sigh of relief.

This time around, though, reports from Russian media suggest that Moscow may be moving to construct a more

permanent outpost for its forces on Venezuela's La Orchalia island – which sits only 1,500 miles from Florida. Turning this Caribbean stronghold into a Russian military base Tu-160 nuclear bombers (or even anti-access/area-denial A2/AD

systems such as long-range anti-ship missiles or SAMs) would be a highly provocative move, and one that strikes to the core of the US Munroe Doctrine, first espoused in the 19th century, to oppose foreign meddling and influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Any deployment of Russian nuclear-capable bombers this close to the US mainland, (after Moscow has also openly boasted of flaunting previous arms reduction agreements), may be a 'red line' for Washington that demands a strong response.

Summary

Though the slow-motion collapse of Venezuela's economy and resulting security headache for Colombia may seem like a regional issue between the two countries, wider Cold War 2.0 geopolitics driven by Russian adventurism and Moscow's fears that the US may sanction 'regime change' against its Caribbean ally may provide the spark to escalate off a wider conflict. Can for example, the US sit back while another Syrian-style civil war erupts right on its doorstep, and Russia taunts it with a nuclear dagger aimed at America's throat?



Two U.S. Navy F/A-18E Super Hornets. The aircraft in the background is deploying infra-red flares.