



Fact Sheet

Venezuela's Military Spending

Over the past few years there have been dozens of news stories about Venezuela and its military spending. These stories often take facts out of context or are inaccurately published with the purpose of creating the misconception that Venezuela is anything but a peaceful country. The facts clearly show:

1. Recent claims that Venezuela is engaged in an arms race are meant to conceal concerns over a U.S.-Colombia military agreement.
2. Venezuela's military spending is among the lowest in the region.
3. Venezuela's purchases of weapons and equipment are plainly defensive, are meant to replace aging stockpiles and aid in the fight against drugs, crime and other threats.
4. Because of an arms embargo imposed by the U.S. in 2006, Venezuela was forced to seek other supplier countries for necessary military equipment.
5. Venezuela's purchases have been transparent.
6. Other countries in the region have similarly upgraded their armed forces.
7. Venezuela's neighbors have expressed their understanding of its military needs.
8. Venezuelan weapons stay in Venezuela.

Recent claims that Venezuela is engaged in an arms race are meant to conceal concerns over a U.S.-Colombia military agreement.

The recent accusations against Venezuela are meant to conceal regional concerns over an agreement between the U.S. and Colombia that would allow U.S. soldiers to be stationed at seven Colombian military bases, allegedly for anti-terror and anti-drug operations. Though the agreement has been roundly criticized in the region, including by Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Brazil, neither the U.S. nor Colombia have agreed to release details as to what the U.S. troops will be doing.

This agreement is of additional concern to Colombia's neighbors because of an incident in

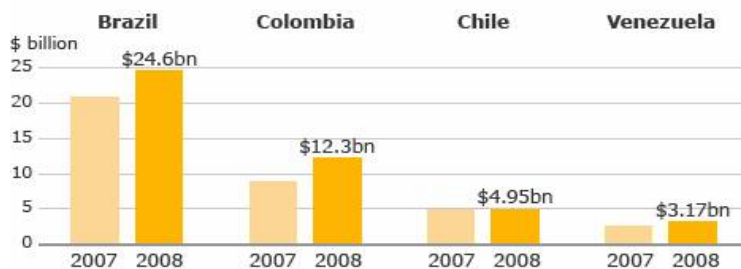
2008 where Colombian forces illegally engaged in operations on Ecuadorian soil. Additionally, Venezuelan has seen its sovereignty violated as an extension of Colombia's internal conflict, and concerns exist that these violations could only worsen with an increased U.S. presence. At a recent summit of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), 11 of 12 countries present demanded that Colombia explicitly guarantee that Colombian operations would not cross over into other countries.

Venezuela's military spending is among the lowest in South America.

Despite claims to the contrary, Venezuela's military spending is not unusually high. In fact, it remains below that of U.S. allies in the region.

About 1.1 percent of Venezuela's GDP goes to military spending, below the South American regional average of 1.7 percent and significantly less than Colombia (5.7 percent) and Chile (2.9 percent).¹ Despite having the region's second-largest GDP, Venezuela is fourth in total defense spending, behind Brazil, Colombia and Chile.²

How arms spending in South America has grown
A comparison of defence spending, 2007-08



2008 defence spending as % of GDP



Source: Jane's

Venezuela's purchases of weapons and equipment are plainly defensive, are meant to replace aging stockpiles and aid



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

in the fight against drugs, crime and other threats.

Venezuela is committed both to regional peace and to building the necessary capacity to defend and protect its territorial integrity. As such, recent purchases of weapons and equipment have been aimed at updating stockpiles needed for national defense and to fight transnational threats like drug traffickers and criminal syndicates.

A Strong Defense: In a recent visit to Russia, President Chavez agreed to purchase 92 T-72 tanks along with several types of short-range missiles, including the Buk-M2 and S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to build a powerful air defense system. President Chavez emphasized that these purchases only have defensive purposes. "Let me be clear, Venezuela has no plans to invade anybody, or to be aggressive towards anybody."³

As analysts have asserted, "Venezuela does not pose any military threat to the United States...[but is rather] creating a powerful defensive force that could dissuade any foreign force from attacking."⁴

But why would Venezuela need to dissuade anyone from attacking? Venezuela is one of the world's leading oil suppliers, and recent incidents have demonstrated the needs for a strong defense. With a 2008 attack on Ecuadorian territory, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe indicated that he was adopting the Bush administration policy of pre-emptive war.

Additionally, in June 2009 the U.S. and Colombia signed an agreement that would allow U.S. soldiers to use seven Colombian bases for alleged ant-narcotics and anti-terror operations. This agreement provoked concern and condemnation throughout the region, especially in the midst of the U.S. Navy's deployment its Fourth Fleet to the region, which has already caused one airspace-violation incident.^{5, 6}

Updating Aging Stockpiles: The purchase of Russian fighter jets in recent years corresponded to the number of F-16s sold to Venezuela by the U.S. in 1980. Since the U.S. has refused to supply key parts necessary for these planes, Venezuela was been forced to look elsewhere to

rebuild its air force. Therefore, the new planes come as a replacement, and not as an expansion, of its fleet.

Similarly, the 2006 purchase of 100,000 Russian rifles was made in order to replace Belgian-made rifles that were over 50 years old – and fully obsolete.

Fighting Threats: The purchase of 53 MI 17 helicopters and three JYL-1 long range 3D surveillance radars was made in order to patrol the border with Colombia. This equipment will be used to fight drug trafficking and other illegal activities in the area. Paradoxically, Venezuela is being criticized for taking a direct step towards securing its borders from drug traffickers, guerillas and paramilitary forces.

Moreover, in 2008 Venezuela negotiated with the Chinese government the acquisition of 24 K-8 planes for training and border protection purposes.⁷ This acquisition was made in substitution of the purchase of 24 Brazilian-made Embraer EMB 314 Super Tucanos that was vetoed by the United States due to the fact that these planes contain American technology.⁸ The Venezuelan government has also reinforced its border protection equipment with the acquisition of seven additional Chinese long-range JYL-1 radars which should be operational and be able to monitor 100 percent of Venezuela's airspace by 2013.⁹

Venezuela's purchases have been transparent.

In a UNASUR summit on September 16, 2009 in Quito, Ecuador, Venezuela pledged to offer all the details of its purchases of Russian arms to its regional neighbors. This offer extended the spirit of transparency regarding its military purchases and agreements.

On August 28, 2009 in his closing remarks at the Extraordinary Presidential Summit of UNASUR in San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina, President Chavez declared: "If for example someone says, as has been said, that Venezuela has an agreement with Russia, I have no problem...Yes we have, cooperation, oil, energy, including peaceful nuclear energy, satellite cooperation with China as well. I am going to Moscow, in a week I should be in Moscow, but I have no problem to show here and to the world, well what we are doing with Russia, or China or Iran."



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

Other countries in the region have similarly upgraded their armed forces.

Neighboring countries have also increased their spending to replace obsolete technology and strengthen their defensive capabilities. Brazil's spending is set to increase by 32 percent this year. They are developing hi-tech weapons and are increasing military salaries and pensions by 31 to 137 percent. Colombia will increase spending by 13 percent, has recently purchased nearly three-dozen helicopters and thirteen fighter jets. It has also upgraded its Navy.¹⁰

On September 6, 2009 in an interview to Radio France International, President Lula of Brazil announced that negotiations between his country and France were "advancing very rapidly" for the acquisition of around 30 Dassault Rafale fighter jets, along with an unspecified number of helicopters and submarines.¹¹

It is important to mention that Latin America accounts for about 3 percent of global military spending while having around 9 percent of the world's population. Europe has about 11 percent of the world's population and is responsible for 25 percent of global military spending. The United States has less than 5 percent of the world's population yet is responsible for 48 percent of global military spending.^{12,13}

Despite the increases in spending, talks of an arms race in Latin America are misguided and distract attention from where it ought to be placed.

It is important to highlight that one of the main purposes of recent acquisitions by the Venezuelan government has been to boost the border-protection and disaster-relief capabilities of the Venezuelan Armed Forces, and not for offensive purposes as some have claimed.

Venezuela's neighbors and even the United States have expressed their understanding about Venezuela's military needs.

On April 19 2009 President Barack Obama declared: "Venezuela is a country whose defense budget is

probably 1/600th of the United States.' They own Citgo," the retail arm of Venezuela's national oil company, Obama said. 'It's unlikely that as a consequence of me shaking hands or having a polite conversation with Mr. Chávez that we are endangering the strategic interests of the United States,' dismissing comments by conservatives who have portrayed Venezuelan defense policies as a direct threat to the United States and other neighbors."¹⁴

Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim affirmed: "There is no arms race in Latin America...It is important that countries have weapons. The projection of power by South America depends on its dissuasive powers of defense."¹⁵ In 2005, Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs Carolina Barco asserted, "[T]he arms purchase is a sovereign Venezuelan decision for its legitimate defense and internal necessities."¹⁶ In 2006, Ecuador's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Francisco Carrión, said, "Ecuador is not worried" about Venezuelan arms purchases.¹⁷

Venezuelan weapons stay in Venezuela.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Lt. Gen. Michael Maples, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said that Venezuelan weapons are going "into armories" and not to the FARC.¹⁸

In a recent incident, on July 26, 2009, the Colombian government leveled unsubstantiated accusations against Venezuela, claiming that three anti-tank rocket launchers bought from Sweden 20 years ago were found in a FARC guerilla camp, and suggested that the current Venezuelan government had provided them.

According to the *New York Times*, the military equipment in question was found in October 2008, begging the question as to why the Colombian government withheld this information until this particular moment. Moreover, on August 5, 2009, President Chavez reminded the public about a public document issued by the Venezuelan National Guard and shared with the Colombian government in 1995 clearly reporting the theft of five anti-tank rocket launchers from a Venezuelan military installation during a FARC raid on Venezuelan territory, long before President Chavez was ever governing the country. The three



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

mentioned anti-tanks rockets launchers were part of this group of stolen weapons.

To accuse Venezuela of providing arms to Colombian insurgents due to some weapons being transited through Venezuela would be like accusing the U.S. of providing arms to Mexican drug cartels, given that over 90 percent of weapons confiscated from these groups are first purchased in the U.S.¹⁹ There have also been allegations that “heavy duty weaponry has been stolen from Department of Defense facilities and National Guard armories and trafficked into Mexico.”²⁰ Despite these statistics and claims, it would be irresponsible to accuse the government of the United States of participating in or allowing illegal weapons trafficking. It is similarly irresponsible to accuse Venezuela of the same.

September 16, 2009.

For more detailed information visit our website at:
<http://www.embavenez-us.org/>

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¹³ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division
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¹⁴ “Obama Closes Summit, Vows Broader Engagement With Latin America”, *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2009,
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