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US-Russia tensions mount over warplanes in Venezuela

The landing of two Russian long-range strategic bombers at an airport outside of the Venezuelan capital of Caracas Monday touched off a bitter exchange between US and Russian officials, underscoring the increasingly tense and dangerous relations that prevail between the world's two major nuclear powers.

The supersonic bombers, Tupolev Tu-160 aircraft, capable of carrying short-range nuclear missiles, were accompanied by an AN-124 transport aircraft and an Il-62 passenger jet, together with 100 pilots and other Russian personnel. All had made the flight of over 10,000 km (6,200 miles), in what constituted both a show of support for the government of President Nicolas Maduro and an exercise in the long-range projection of Russian military power.

Washington responded with a series of bitter denunciations. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted a criticism of Russia for sending its bombers “half way around the world to Venezuela,” adding that, “The people of Russia and Venezuela should see this for what it is: two corrupt governments squandering public funds, and squelching liberty and freedom while their people suffer.”

Similarly, a Pentagon spokesman condemned the exercise. Col. Robert Manning portrayed the US military's posture toward Latin America as a “humanitarian” enterprise, calling attention to the recent tour of the region by the Navy hospital ship, the USNS Comfort, which made a propaganda-driven port of call in Colombia to treat migrants from Venezuela. The cynicism of this gesture is made plain by the deployment of US troops on

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the US-Mexican border to prevent refugees and immigrants from the violence-torn and impoverished US semi-colonies in Central America from reaching the United States and applying for asylum, condemning them to hunger and squalor in Tijuana.

“Contrast this to Russia,” Colonel Manning said, “whose approach to the man-made disaster in Venezuela is to send strategic bomber aircraft instead of humanitarian assistance. The Venezuelan government should be focusing on providing humanitarian assistance and aid to lessen the suffering of its people, and not on Russian warplanes.”

Both Moscow and Caracas responded with sharp denunciations of the US statements.

The Kremlin described Pompeo’s language as “very undiplomatic.” The spokesman for the Russian presidency, Dmitri Peskov, stated: “As for the idea that we are squandering money, we do not agree. It’s not really appropriate for a country half of whose defense budget could feed the whole of Africa to be making such statements.” Washington’s \$700 billion military budget is ten times the amount that Russia spends on its own armed forces. Venezuela’s Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza described Pompeo’s statement as “cynical.” In a series of tweets, he said that Washington maintained “at least 800 military bases (known) in 70 countries,” adding, “If the US is so worried about waste, review its immense and unjustifiable military budget ... Surely the 50 million poor and families without access to public health in the US can suggest fairer destinations for those funds.”

The Russian aircraft are supposed to carry out joint exercises with Venezuela’s air force, in what Caracas described as training for defense against foreign aggression. The Venezuelan government has charged that the US poses a threat of invasion and has plotted to assassinate President Maduro. While Washington has denied the charges, Trump last year made public statements stressing that the US has a “military option” in regard to Venezuela and privately discussed with aides as well as Latin American leaders the feasibility of a military intervention to effect regime change. In 2002, the US backed an abortive coup against Maduro’s predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez.

The flight of the Russian planes to Venezuela came one week after the country’s president paid a state visit to Moscow cementing agreements involving \$5 billion in new Russian investments in the country’s state-run oil industry and \$1 billion in mining, particularly related gold, a sector that was targeted last month with new US sanctions.

The Russian government and the oil giant Rosneft have together lent Venezuela some \$17 billion since 2006, a source of financing that has become increasingly critical to the Maduro government as the country’s economy has spiraled downward alongside falling oil prices.

For Moscow, the alliance with Venezuela is driven by definite economic and political interests. Both countries' economies are heavily dependent upon oil exports. Unlike Venezuela, however, Russia is not a member of OPEC, and it has sought to use its ties with Caracas to influence the policies of the oil cartel.

The Russian-Venezuelan alliance has become a fixation for the Pentagon. Last February, the head of US Southern Command, Adm. Kurt W. Tidd, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that "Russia's increased role in our hemisphere is particularly concerning, given its intelligence and cyber capabilities" and its "intent to upend international stability and order and discredit democratic institutions."

Tidd, who retired last month, said that Venezuela's "expanded port and logistics access" allows Russia a "persistent, pernicious presence, including more-frequent maritime intelligence collection and visible force projection in the Western Hemisphere."

Monday was not the first time that Russian bombers and other aircraft have flown to Caracas. Similar visits were paid by the nuclear-capable TU-160s in 2008 and 2013. The furor that this latest visit has unleashed in Washington is bound up with the broader drive toward military confrontation between the US and Russia, ranging from the escalating conflict provoked by Ukraine in the Azov Sea to the US ultimatum that it will abrogate the INF Treaty with Russia, which barred both countries from developing and deploying short- and medium-range nuclear missiles.

Over the past week, the US has escalated military tensions, conducting an "extraordinary" overflight of Ukraine with a US Air Force surveillance plane, in what the Pentagon described as a gesture designed to "reaffirm US commitment to Ukraine" and "the security of European nations."

Meanwhile, the US Navy has sent a guided-missile destroyer into the Sea of Japan near the base of the Russian Navy's Pacific fleet, the first time that such an operation has been launched since the height of the Cold War. Another US Navy ship is being dispatched to the Black Sea off Ukraine.

The clear message of the uproar in Washington over the arrival of Russian planes in Caracas is that Latin America is seen by US imperialism as a battlefield in a looming world war for US global hegemony.