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By Bill Van Auken
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Lavrov tours Latin America as Pentagon brands Russia, China as “malign actors”

Soviet Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov initiated a three-nation tour of Latin America today, with his first stop in Cuba, to be followed by visits to Mexico and Venezuela.

The tour comes on the heels of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s swing through four former Soviet republics—Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—and a meeting with the foreign ministers of five Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Pompeo dedicated the tour to denouncing both Russian and Chinese influence and pressuring host governments to distance themselves from Moscow and Beijing. He attempted to play the “human rights” card, posing as a defender of China’s Uighur and Kazakh minorities. The effect was somewhat diminished by Washington’s placing Kyrgyzstan on the Trump administration’s travel ban in the midst of the trip.

In response to Pompeo’s bullying, Uzbekistan’s Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov issued a statement stressing that the countries of Central Asia “would really not like to feel on ourselves unfavorable political consequences in relation to some competition in our region between large powers.”

The back-to-back tours in regions that Washington and Moscow each regard as their “own backyards,” the contemptuous phrase employed by US imperialism to describe the lands to its south, are an indication of growing global war tensions.

The main focus of Lavrov’s trip is Venezuela. Before leaving Moscow, the Russian foreign minister issued a direct warning against a US military intervention to overthrow

the Venezuelan government of President Nicolas Maduro. The use of military force against Venezuela, he said, “will humiliate the entire region, all of Latin America, and the entire Caribbean.” The Russian Foreign Ministry also stated that such an intervention would provoke a civil war.

Whether these warnings are merely pro forma or reflect real concerns based upon Russian intelligence regarding Washington’s plans in Venezuela is unclear.

The regime change operation mounted around the person of Juan Guaidó has proven a failure. The previously virtually unknown figure in the right-wing, US-funded Voluntad Popular party swore himself in as “interim president” in January of last year and was immediately recognized by Washington as the “legitimate” government of Venezuela.

He has steadily lost support, however, since his failed attempt to instigate a military coup last April. In recent weeks he has been reduced to appealing for support from the billionaires gathered in Davos and from the right-wing exile community in Miami.

The Trump administration has continued to maintain its position that “all options are on the table” in relation to Venezuela. One indication that military planning for intervention is underway came at the end of last month with a joint exercise staged by US and Colombian troops. Paratroopers from the two countries conducted a simulated assault to seize another country’s airport, the kind of operation that would be carried out in any direct military intervention to overthrow the Maduro government.

Lavrov also denounced the punishing US sanctions against Venezuela, a virtual economic blockade that is tantamount to a state of war. Russia has provided a limited means of circumventing the sanctions. The Russian state-owned energy giant Rosneft has acted as a middleman, buying oil from the Venezuelan state-owned oil company PDVSA and then selling it onto the world market. The Russian firm is also providing badly needed fuel, including gasoline and diesel, which Venezuela’s own refineries are unable to supply. Thus far, Washington has not targeted Rosneft with sanctions for violating the embargo against Venezuela.

Maduro’s bourgeois nationalist government has indicated in recent weeks that it is preparing to privatize significant sections of PDVSA and open up Venezuelan oil to more direct and widespread exploitation by transnational oil companies. One company that would be in a position to reap profits off this shift is Chevron, which already holds a large stake in the Petropiar oil project in the Orinoco oil belt. The US Treasury Department has

repeatedly waived sanctions so that the company can continue its lucrative operations in Venezuela.

Oil workers in Venezuela have charged that in preparation for a more sweeping privatization, PDVSA is carrying out mass layoffs and forced early retirements.

Lavrov's talks in Caracas may well include negotiations to ensure the interests of Rosneft in the face of a coming incursion by Chevron, Total and other transnationals.

The Russian foreign minister's trip also comes less than a week after the chief of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), Admiral Craig Faller, testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee on January 30, describing Maduro's administration as an "illegitimate government that is destroying the fabric of society" and a "safe haven" for terrorists. He classified it as "the most direct threat to peace and security in the Western Hemisphere."

Presenting SOUTHCOM's annual "Posture Review," Admiral Faller made it clear that the US targeting of Venezuela was bound up with a broader view of Latin America as a battleground in the "great power" conflicts between US imperialism and its two nuclear-armed rivals, Russia and China.

He classified Russia and China as "malign state actors" that are "part of a vicious circle of threats that deliberately erode stability and security in the region."

Faller centered his fire on China, which he indicted for becoming the region's number one investor and creditor while moving to overtake the US as its principal trading partner, with China-Latin America trade increasing by 19 percent in 2019 compared to the previous year. He said that 19 Latin American and Caribbean countries had joined Beijing's One Belt One Road Initiative and that 25 of the region's 31 countries were hosting Chinese infrastructure projects. He also noted that the Chinese firms Huawei and ZTE had ongoing projects in 16 countries and were becoming the predominant force in the development of the region's telecommunications.

Faller told the Senate panel, "I ask myself the question, why would China want to buy an island and lock up a 99-year lease for most of the coast of El Salvador, right here, within a two-hour flight of the continental United States? They are trying to achieve a positional advantage right here in our neighborhood. And that's alarming and concerning to me and drives a sense of urgency with which I look at this competition."

He charged Russia with having “projected power in our neighborhood, establishing a military footprint in Venezuela” and using Cuba to “collect intelligence in close proximity to the United States.”

Faller hypocritically referred to the mass upheavals in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras and Bolivia as a sign that “citizens are exercising democratic rights to uphold their constitutions,” while in the same breath claiming that Cuba and Russia were responsible for “instigating social unrest.”

In the end, the strategy of US imperialism and SOUTHCOM in Latin America is based upon the use of military force to prop up bourgeois regimes under siege from popular uprisings against social inequality and to counter the erosion of Washington’s regional hegemony, turning the region into a battlefield in a global war against its “great power” rivals.

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