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Russia's search an alternative buyer for S-300 air-defence missile batteries originally earmarked for Iran appears to have been hastily resolved. On 18th October Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez announced to journalists in Kiev, Ukraine, that his country intends to purchase five S-300s. The deal is expected to cost Venezuela \$800 million. Russia's compliance with United Nations Resolution 1929 vindicates international consensus that Iran would use the S-300s to protect nuclear facilities. As it is highly unlikely that Venezuela has a similar nuclear programme the sale of the S-300s to Caracas should be comparatively easy. Yet why would Venezuela need to make such a purchase?

An overview of the S-300 suggests that Venezuela will be purchasing one of the most formidable air-defence systems currently available. The S-300 is capable of engaging six incoming targets simultaneously at ranges of up to 300km. According to the Federation of American Scientists the S-300 is also able to counter intensive air raids at low-to-high altitudes. The system can also be used to target low altitude objects such as cruise missiles and possibly to intercept strategic ballistic missiles.

Should Iran have completed the purchase of the S-300s the dynamics of the Middle East security environment would also have changed. As Iran's outdated air defences remain in place both the United States and Israel can retain the option of a pre-emptive strike on Tehran's nuclear facilities. Whilst the deployment of S-300s would do little to deter a larger-scale American bombardment it is likely that Tel Aviv would reassess its options. Yet this makes Chavez's decision to purchase the S-300s all the more mystifying.

Not only is it blindingly obvious that Chavez faces little in the way external security challenges, relations with his fiercest local rival have recently improved. Caracas's diplomatic ties with Bogota improved almost as quickly as they were severed after the then-President Alvaro Uribe's declaration to the Organisation of American States that Venezuela was harbouring terrorists. By mid-August full relations had been restored and on the 3rd November Chavez signed trade agreements with his counterpart Juan Manuel Santos.

Colombia's position as Venezuela's second largest trading partner was a likely determinant of restored diplomatic relations. Of even greater significance are suggestions that Colombia may not ratify a military accord with the United States. Signed in October 2009, the accord built upon existing cooperation to allow the US military access to specific Colombian facilities. Chavez's response was that the accord permitted the United States to increase its regional military presence and carry out covert activities against countries politically at odds with Washington.

What Chavez overlooked was that the accord actually granted the US access to facilities to undertake mutually agreed activities with Colombia. Further, the accord did not alter the

personnel ceiling of 800 military and 600 civilian staff allowed to use the facilities. Yet Chavez appeared quick to label Santos's decision not to process the accord as a victory for 'rationality, common sense and responsibility.' Whilst improved diplomatic relations may have played a part, it is likely that a High Court decision requiring the accord to be ratified by Congress was more influential.

Whilst any kind of attack on Venezuela remains inconceivable, the question still remains: why does Chavez need to make as bold a purchase as the S-300? Should the deal be completed Venezuela will be consolidating ever closer military ties with Russia. In September 2009, for example, Russia granted Venezuela a \$2.2 billion loan for the purchase of military equipment. The deal includes 92 T-72 main battle tanks and 12 9K58 Smerch multiple rocket systems. It is speculated that Venezuela has also purchased 12 Tor-1 air-defence systems with Russian loans. Whilst the Tor-1 is less formidable than the S-300, the purchase of the latter seems extreme considering Venezuela does not need such an extensive air-defence capability.

Instead, Chavez's proposed purchase of the S-300s should be regarded as a rather expensive addition to his anti-Washington rhetoric. From the outset of his presidency Chavez has presented himself as a talisman for those who accuse the United States of neglecting its own backyard. In the case of Venezuela, Chavez has used the excesses of the corrupt oil industry to embark upon social and economic programmes that challenge the influence of Washington over his country. Closer military ties with Russia also serve this purpose. Whilst joint Russian-Venezuelan naval exercises in the Caribbean in 2008 can be viewed as Moscow's response to Washington's support for Georgia, the opportunity to annoy the United States would not have been lost on Chavez. Purchasing weapons originally meant for Iran merely adds to that!

What the sale of the S-300s to Venezuela means for Russia will be the subject of further analysis coming soon.