
In Latin America, Weapons Buying Spreads Mistrust

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Weapons purchases in Latin America are soaring as nations cast a wary eye on their neighbors. Whether it's called an "arms race" or a "coincidental modernization" of existing stocks, a wave of weapons purchases by Latin American nations is causing neighbors to watch each other with growing mistrust and fear.

Protection

Brazil says it must protect its newfound oil and gas riches. Venezuela says the United States military might attack it. Colombia is worried by Venezuela; Ecuador is watching Colombia; and Paraguay is keeping an eye on Bolivia. There is no question that weapons sales around the region are soaring. They almost doubled in just five years, from \$24 billion in 2003 to \$47 billion last year, according to one report by Colombian analyst Javier Loaiza. Others put the 2008 total at \$60 billion.

The United States Government officials are monitoring the deals with a level of concern but avoid the term "arms race." One said he preferred to call it a "coincidental modernization of existing stocks" to reflect the absence so far of widespread tit-for-tat arms purchases.

"They are buying big-ticket items, but the data shows we are not yet at an arms race," said one top Obama Administration official who monitors Latin America. Only four countries account for 80 percent of all the arms purchases, Brazil, Venezuela, Chile, and Colombia, and 80-85 percent of the region's military expenditures go to salaries and pensions, not weapons, added the official, who asked for anonymity to speak frankly on the issue.

Michael Shifter, Vice President of the Latin American Dialogue think tank in Washington, agreed there is no arms race yet but said there is cause for concern, such as the clashes between conservative President Alvaro Uribe in Colombia and his leftist neighbors, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Colombian troops last year attacked a guerrilla camp on the Ecuadorean side of the border, killing a top rebel commander, leading Correa and Chávez to freeze relations with Bogotá. Chávez also ordered tanks to his border with Colombia.

There is a tremendous amount of political tension and mistrust between governments in the region, Shifter said. There is also an availability of resources [money for purchases] and a deficiency in regional mechanisms to track purchases and promote transparency."

The sudden bout of arms deals also may be a delayed result of the end in the 1980s of many military governments in the region, said Adam Isacson, director of the Latin American security program at the Center for International Policy in Washington.

The defense budgets had been staying very low, and then commodity prices went through the roof, so everybody started buying like crazy, Isacson said, referring to the prices of items such as Venezuelan oil, Brazilian soya, and Chilean copper.

Brazil leads the buying spree—with \$27 billion paid or contracted in 2008, according to the Loaiza report—as it seeks to protect vast new oil and natural gas deposits found offshore and increase its control of the vast Amazon.

Everyone knows Brazil is a peaceful nation, but we need to be able to show our teeth if anyone wants to mess with us, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said in September. The “teeth” include 36 jet fighters, five submarines, 250 tanks, and fifty helicopters.

In Venezuela, “there is a genuine concern that they would be vulnerable to a United States attack, so they want to protect themselves,” said Shifter, especially after Colombia agreed to host seven United States military facilities. “And it is a way to project Venezuela’s power in the region and needle the United States, which is what Chávez is all about.”

Venezuela has been reportedly negotiating with Russia for S-300 long-range ground-to-air missiles and nearly 100 T-72 main battle tanks. Chávez also has bought Sukhoi jets and SAM-24 anti-aircraft missiles, shoulder-fired weapons that caused particular alarm because of fears they could fall into the hands of guerrillas or terrorists.

Chile is buying fighters and submarines; Peru is buying four frigates; and Ecuador is buying jets, frigates, helicopters, and surveillance drones, according to published reports.

Fighter Jets

Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay rank among the lowest spenders on new weaponry. But just days after Bolivia announced in September [2009] that it was buying six Chinese jets, congressmen in Paraguay demanded their government reconsider its modest weapons purchasing plans.

Latin America experienced only a half dozen inter-state wars since the 1940s, most of them brief conflicts. And none of the region’s ten or so lingering border disputes are considered likely to erupt into open conflict in the near future. But several Latin American Presidents and other officials nevertheless insist that a very real arms race is lashing the region, eating up resources that would be better spent.

The arms race is there. It is a reality, Uruguay President Tabaré Vázquez said during a visit to Washington.

Peruvian President Alán García recently urged the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS) to help halt the “excessive military spending”; and Paraguay’s ambassador to the OAS, Hugo Saguier, formally asked the organization on October 15 to discuss the issue. OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza said he had taken note of the request and “promised to study the possibility of presenting the issue” to the hemispheric group’s ruling Permanent Council. In private, however, Latin American diplomats in Washington acknowledge the OAS can do little to control the weapons purchases.

We can discuss the issue, and some will say that an arms race exists and others will say it does not, said one diplomat who asked his name not be published to speak honestly about the topic. Perhaps we can even reach agreement on a statement declaring our rejection of an arms race. But beyond that, we can do nothing.