

'War' against U.S. finds no ally in China

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By William Ratliff

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's world tour landed him in China recently for the fourth time during his presidency. One of his main objectives there was to try to draw China into his global "guerrilla war" against the United States. The former paratrooper was elected president in 1998 and, buttressed by petrodollars, has proclaimed himself the anti-American revolutionary successor to his mentor, Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Chávez, who arrived in China praising the Middle Kingdom as the world's alternative to American capitalism, has long lauded Mao Zedong as a brilliant guerrilla strategist. Mao theorized about what Chávez is trying to do: coordinate a series of unconventional attacks on the United States that will chip away at the seemingly invincible enemy and prove it to be a "paper tiger."

Beijing warmly welcomed Chávez, and important oil, mining and telecommunications deals between Venezuela and China are in the works. But China almost certainly will not leap into the vanguard of any Chávez-led offensive against the United States. It has far too much to lose economically by seriously confronting the Americans.

Seeking support

During the last month, Chávez has been roaming the world lining up what are, or he hopes will be, allies in his guerrilla war against the U.S. He is promoting Venezuela's candidacy for a seat on the U.N. Security Council -- which Beijing endorsed last week. In Russia, President Vladimir V. Putin sold him advanced military arms and licensed factories for producing Kalashnikov assault rifles in Venezuela, over strong U.S. objections. And in Iran, Chávez signed important oil-related accords.

Members of Congress and military commanders in Hawaii are concerned about Venezuela's growing links with Russia and Iran, and also by Chávez's ties to China. Several months ago, while Chinese President Hu Jintao was visiting Washington, D.C., the Pacific Command even conducted a war game in which Venezuela joined Iran and China in a showdown with the United States.

But Chávez's visit to Beijing wasn't likely to be devoted to planning a military attack on the United States. Instead, the focus was on expanding Chinese investments in Venezuelan oil. The always politically driven Chávez is determined to undermine the U.S. influence in part by denying it access to his country's rich oil reserves. But right now, the United States is also Venezuela's main oil market, so Chávez needs to find a replacement buyer.

Chávez frequently says that in the future Venezuela will provide as much as 20 percent of China's total oil-import needs. If total Chinese oil imports rise to 7 million barrels a day in a decade, as they might, this would bring Venezuelan sales to China to 1.4 million barrels, about what Caracas currently sells to the United States.

Many obstacles remain to Chávez's reaching his oil delivery goal, including insufficient production, a shortage of tankers, lack of refineries and very long and inconvenient transportation routes.

The Chinese are investing in Venezuela, as many countries are, but Beijing appears to view Chávez as both an opportunity and a danger. Importing oil from Venezuela will diversify China's foreign suppliers. China also is concerned about a unipolar world dominated by the United States. To the extent that Venezuela and its Latin American friends flourish, they will tend to dissipate U.S. power. That's good for China.

Destabilization risk

But to the degree that Chávez is successful in destabilizing the Americas, it will be more difficult for China to enforce trade, investment and other agreements and to guarantee the safe and efficient delivery of oil and other resources from producers in Latin America to China. Also, for China, nothing is more important than a guaranteed supply of resources necessary for continuing domestic growth. So that would be bad.

Chávez has tried often to draw China into his disputes with the United States, without much success.

Thus far, most Chinese activities in Venezuela have been largely what one might expect from a large, rapidly modernizing nation seeking to overcome 150 years of failure and humiliation and planning to take its place as a major "stakeholder" in the modern world.

But despite colorful grandstanding, Chávez's trip probably won't result in making significant headway.

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