

Hidalgo: How to address Chavez's nuclear threat

01:00 AM EST on Saturday, January 29, 2011

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WASHINGTON

Venezuela's close relationship with Iran and plans to build nuclear facilities with Russian help are raising fears in Washington of another nuclear crisis. The new Republican House majority may place increased pressure on the Obama administration to confront Caracas.

However, Washington need not panic. A "Chávez bomb" is but a distant possibility and much will happen in Venezuela in the meantime. The U.S. should work with other interested states to discourage Caracas from pursuing nuclear weapons.

Venezuela's Hugo Chávez is a disruptive force in Latin America. He has destroyed democratic institutions in his own country. Abundant oil revenues have let him subsidize Fidel and Raul Castro's dictatorship, interfere in elections in nearby states and aid Communist insurgents in next-door Colombia.

Chávez's arms purchases far outstrip his nation's security needs. Over the last decade Caracas has purchased fighters, attack helicopters, anti-aircraft missiles and 100,000 assault rifles. Yet Venezuela has been at peace since 1823 and faces no external threats.

Thus, while the country suffers from severe energy shortages — primarily due to the Chávez government's mismanagement — there's reason to doubt Chávez's assertion that his nuclear program is for purely peaceful purposes.

Yet even if Venezuela chooses to pursue nuclear weapons, it's far from certain that Caracas will succeed. The difficult process requires time, money, technology and science.

Developing nuclear weapons is even harder in the face of international opposition. Moreover, creating weapons of deliverable size poses another significant challenge.

Despite Chávez's pretensions to global leadership, his corruption-ridden and inept regime may be the biggest obstacle to a Venezuelan nuclear bomb. Worst is his gross economic mismanagement despite the government's receipt of billions in oil revenues.

The country's infrastructure is crumbling. Last April an offshore-drilling rig rented by PDVSA, Venezuela's state-owned oil company, sank. The deal involved a questionable rental contract with former PDVSA executives and the accident was never properly investigated. Earlier this year, power blackouts caused by a series of explosions at electrical plants and inadequate maintenance at the Guri hydro-electrical dam forced the government to impose electricity rationing.

Venezuela's transportation infrastructure is literally falling apart. The government agency that manages the country's food supply let 120,000 tons of imported food rot in port while its own supermarkets had shortages of basic staples. Chávez's anti-business policies discourage private investment.

Although Caracas is a major oil supplier, it cannot easily afford an expensive nuclear program. With the days of skyrocketing oil prices over for the foreseeable future, the government faces serious financial difficulties.

For example, Chávez's regime owes Colombian businesses about \$500 million for past exports. PDVSA has delayed payments to its contractors. After Chávez's allies lost the legislative elections in October, his government launched an expropriation spree but only 9 percent of the confiscated industries have been paid for.

Moreover, Chávez is not certain to retain power in the face of a contracting economy, staggering crime rate, unbridled corruption and an increasingly united opposition. Even if he wins re-election in 2012, Chávez probably will find it more difficult to achieve his international ambitions.

Obviously, it would be foolish to dismiss the possibility of Venezuela becoming a nuclear power, but it is equally mistaken to speak of "an over-the-horizon Cuban Missile Crisis," in the words of the Heritage Foundation's Peter Brookes. Venezuela is nowhere close to or certain of becoming a threat to the U.S. Thus, the Obama administration should develop a long-term strategy to head off any "Chávez bomb."

The U.S. should maintain a low profile in Venezuelan affairs. The chief issue in the upcoming election should be Chávez's disastrous record. The less attention received by U.S. officials and policy, the less blame Chávez can off-load on Washington, and the less he can assert that America poses a threat.

At the same time, American individuals and groups should support Venezuelan advocates of liberty. The strongest opposition to Chávez comes from grassroots activists committed to a free society.

The U.S. also should engage Moscow. The Obama administration should be prepared to make concessions on matters of NATO expansion and missile defense as part of a larger political understanding, which would limit or end Russia's military relationship and nuclear plans with Caracas.

Washington should encourage Venezuela's neighbors and United Nations Security Council members to press Caracas, as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to comply with International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. Particularly important are the roles of Brazil and Argentina, which have had nuclear ambitions in the past.

No one, other than, presumably, Hugo Chávez, wants Venezuela to build nuclear weapons. With the threat still distant, patience is a virtue. The U.S. should assemble a diplomatic coalition to constrain any nuclear ambitions in Caracas.

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