



September 22, 2009

What is Venezuela Up To? Chavez's Latest Efforts to Purchase Nuclear Technology are Cause for Concern

By Andrea Scheel

On September 13, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela announced plans to cooperate with Russia on nuclear technology.¹ The exact form of cooperation was not specified, but the purchase of a nuclear power reactor and possibly a research reactor and assistance on uranium or thorium mining from Russia appear to be Chavez's goal. The Venezuelan president's outspoken opposition to sanctions or investigation of Iran's nuclear activities and recent expanded military ties with Iran should give pause to any supplier considering nuclear cooperation with Venezuela.²

Chavez's latest announcement, one of several in recent years indicating plans for nuclear energy development, occurred days after New York District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that his office has been informed that Venezuela is helping Iran circumvent financial sanctions by permitting transactions from Iranian banks to pass through Venezuelan financial institutions.³ An agreement with Venezuela for the import of gasoline was announced by Iran's state press in September, possibly in response to threats by the United States to push for new United Nations sanctions that could include a gas embargo.⁴ Iran and Venezuela will likely continue to

¹ Ian James, "Venezuela's Chavez Aims to Tap Nuclear Energy," Associated Press. September 15, 2009. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hk9wRad6D4mpLEA24Ag1XNyXGW0gD9AO00NG1>

² IAEA Information Circular, *Communication dated 15 August 2005 received from the Permanent Mission of Venezuela to the Agency*, INFCIRC/652, August 17, 2005.

<http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infocircs/2005/infocirc652.pdf>; "Iran, Venezuela Enter into Military Alliance," Press TV. April 30, 2009.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=93122§ionid=351020101>

³ Robert M. Morgenthau, "The Emerging Axis of Iran and Venezuela," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2009.

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB20001424052970203440104574400792835972018.html#mod=todays_us_opinion

⁴ "Iran, Venezuela Sign Oil, Gas Contracts," Press TV. September 7, 2009.

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work together to thwart international economic and financial sanctions against Iran. Venezuela announced in 2005 it would seek cooperation with countries like Iran on a nuclear energy program, and it cannot be ruled out that they could also seek to collaborate on the development of advanced fuel cycle capabilities or nuclear weapons technology for Venezuela.⁵

Venezuela's refusal to promote nuclear transparency and accountability in Iran and its growing closeness to the Iranian regime, which rebuffs comprehensive inspections of its nuclear program, makes the outlook for Venezuela's own nuclear transparency dim. Based on Venezuela's troubling actions to date, Russia would be prudent to cancel plans for nuclear cooperation with the Chavez government.

⁵ "Venezuela Interested in Developing Nuclear Energy for Civil Use," AFX News Limited. May 23, 2005. <http://www.forbes.com/feeds/afx/2005/05/23/afx2046755.html>; "Military Industries Feature in Iran-Venezuela Cooperation," United Press International. September 15, 2009. http://www.upi.com/Security_Industry/2009/09/15/Military-industries-feature-in-Iran-Venezuela-cooperation/UPI-34011253026800/