



Castro's torch to pass: His jackboots may be filled by Chavez

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The good news is that Latin America's longest reigning dictator, Cuba's Fidel Castro, may soon meet his political and physical demise. The bad news is that he may be replaced with a younger, more ambitious, more dangerous Latin American strongman.

No, not Fidel's brother Raul, though he's taken over the reins of Cuban power for the moment. It's Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez we should be worried about.

Chavez, who has been Castro's political understudy for years, sees himself as ready and well positioned to carry on Fidel's revolutionary legacy, leading Latin America and others on an anti-*yanqui* crusade.

Of course, Chavez doesn't have Castro's charismatic socialist revolutionary bona fides, but he has something equally important in helping export his revolution across Latin America: oil wealth.

With fervent revolutionary ideology, backed up by liquid gold, this wealthy Venezuelan caudillo could cause more trouble in our neighborhood than the indigent strongman Castro ever could.

Chavez has had some success already, bankrolling leftist candidates across Latin America. He backed the recently-elected Bolivian president Evo Morales, and he's supporting Nicaragua's Sandinista retread presidential candidate, Daniel Ortega.

Noting the United States gets 15 percent of its oil from Venezuela, Chavez has threatened to cut off exports. He's also been long-suspected of supporting the narco-terrorist FARC guerrillas in neighboring Colombia.

Promoting the preposterous idea that the United States is going to invade Venezuela, Caracas has been building up its armed forces - promising to take on America if necessary - and unsettling the delicate balance of power in the region.

But perhaps equally troubling is Chavez's energetic international outreach, where he's been rubbing elbows with others in his anti-American agenda.

For instance, Chavez recently popped in on Russian President Vladimir Putin, where they announced a \$1 billion arms deal. And just last year Venezuela bought 100,000 Russian AK-47 assault rifles. Chavez intends to license production of the rifle to support his plans for arming up to 2 million reservists.

Chavez also visited Tehran in July, where he received [Iran's](#) highest state medal. He told Iranians: "Iran's fight is our own fight."

The Venezuelan strongman has expressed support for the Iranian nuclear program, and been open about his desire for Venezuela to have one, too. Can't help but worry whether Tehran might share its nuclear know-how with Caracas.

Chavez is also trotting the globe looking for support for his bid for one of the 10 non-permanent seats on the U.N. Security Council during the 2007 rotation. Not surprisingly, the United States strongly opposes the idea.

One stop included a chat with Belarus bully, President Viktor Lukashenko, widely considered Europe's last dictator. Chavez boasted that the two states had created a strategic alliance.

While Castro has, unfortunately, maintained his hammerlock on Cuba since the end of the Cold War and despite the loss of his Soviet sponsor, he's been unable to muster the resources or energy to export his revolution.

But even if we're able to soon toss Fidel into the dustbin of history in the very near future, Venezuela's Castro with Oil, Hugo Chavez, seems sure to replace him as an even bigger thorn in our side.