

Russia and Venezuela in deal to counter 'US aggression'

Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan president, has called for a strategic relationship with Russia to counter aggression from the United States.

By Adrian Blomfield in Moscow

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With a long shopping list for state-of-the-art defence equipment under his arm, Mr Chavez did his best to ingratiate himself with his hosts.

He first signed off on a deal giving Russia's state-owned energy companies – often accused of doubling as private piggy banks for powerful Kremlin forces – exclusive rights to develop new deposits Venezuela's Orinoco Oil Belt.

Then he switched smoothly to flattery, with a call for the Russian rouble to replace the US dollar as the world's global currency.

"We in OPEC have proposed to put an end to the dollar," Mr Chavez said, speaking in his role as self-appointed spokesman for the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

Mr Chavez was given correspondingly warm welcome as he met with one old friend, prime minister Vladimir Putin, and one new one in the form of president Dmitry Medvedev.

Mr Medvedev was particularly effusive, describing Venezuela as Russia's "most important partner".

Ignoring accusations of electoral fraud and authoritarianism that have been directed at both countries, Mr Medvedev told his guest: "We have one common task; to make the surrounding world more democratic, fair and secure."

Despite the bonhomie, it was unclear whether Mr Chavez had got everything he had come for.

The Venezuelan leader wants to buy three submarines and 20 Tor-M1 air defence missile systems in a £1 billion arms contract that would undoubtedly infuriate the US.

Washington's anger, however, is unlikely to persuade Russia to desist.

Mr Putin, whose anti-American speeches were often as colourful as his Venezuelan counterpart's, revelled in his status as Venezuela's champion and principal ally.

So far Dmitry Medvedev, who became president in May, has shown few signs of wanting to depart from the foreign policy of Mr Putin, who has become prime minister and remains, in the eyes of many, Russia's most powerful man.

During Mr Putin's last term, Russia sold Venezuela over £2 billion in arms, from combat helicopters and Sukhoi fighter jets to Kalashnikov rifles.



During Mr Putin's last term, Russia sold Hugo Chavez's Venezuela over £2 billion in arms, from combat helicopters and Sukhoi fighter jets to Kalashnikov rifles Photo: EPA

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