

Brazil Says South America Doesn't Need US Permission to Beef Up Military

Contributed by Newsroom
Wednesday, 16 April 2008

South America has a right to strengthen its armed forces but is not in an arms race, Brazil's defense minister pointed out in Venezuela. Nelson Jobim, who is in the first leg of a continental visit to discuss a planned South American security council, said the region needed military power to strengthen its presence on the world stage.

"There is no arms race in South America," he said after meeting with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who has been investing massive oil windfall earnings to modernize his country's armed forces.

"It is important that countries have weapons. The projection of power by South America depends on its dissuasive powers of defense," said Jobim.

With oil revenue Venezuela has bought Russian jets, helicopters, transport planes and assault rifles. Agricultural powerhouse Brazil is looking to build a nuclear submarine and modernize its defense industry as it revitalizes its large but outdated military.

Brazil that has been working for some time on the idea of a regional defense group pressed the issue following March's Colombia-Ecuador-Venezuela conflict which threatened to take Andean countries to war. Brazil which aspires to a permanent seat on an expanded U.N. Security Council is trying to convert influence in support for its position.

Jobim said the group is not intended to have operational capacity but would coordinate defense policy in the region. He said the body, which excludes the United States, will be up and running by the end of the year.

"This is a South American council and we have no obligation to ask for a license from the United States to do it," he said during the visit to Caracas.

President Chavez is also trying to consolidate its influence in South America and increased military spending to almost US\$ 2 billion in 2006, up 67% from 2003, according to Sweden's SIPRI group, which tracks arms expenditures worldwide.

Brazil's military spending hit an estimated 13.5 billion in 2006, up 13% compared to 2003.

Washington's ally Colombia, which is fighting a decades-long civil war against Marxist oriented, cocaine funded rebels, has a bigger arms budget as a proportion of GDP than its neighbors and a modern fighting force supported by the United States.

Jobim, who is due to travel to Guyana and Suriname later this week, said he would also visit countries from Argentina to Colombia to drum up support for the regional defense body.

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