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Chavez Says May Give U.S. F-16 Jets to Cuba, China

By **Patrick Markey**

Nov 02, 2005

Reuters

CARACAS, Venezuela - Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said Tuesday his government may give its U.S.-made F-16 fighter jets to Cuba or China and replace them with Chinese or Russian aircraft after accusing Washington of blocking purchases of U.S. military parts.

Any exchange of military hardware to those countries would break an agreement with the U.S. government on the transfer of technology without Washington's permission and further strain fraying ties between Venezuela and the United States.

A fierce critic of the Bush administration, Chavez has rattled Washington by strengthening ties with anti-U.S. states like Cuba and promoting his self-described socialist revolution as a counterweight to U.S. regional influence.

"If they don't comply with the contract ... we can do whatever we want with these aircraft, whatever the hell we want. Maybe we'll give 10 planes to Cuba or to China so they can study the technology," Chavez said.

"We could give them away and buy aircraft from China or from Russia. ... We don't need any U.S. imperialism," he said.

A U.S. defense official said there had been no communications with Venezuela's government about any sale of F-16s to other countries, but he noted that U.S. laws on foreign arms sales were "quite strict" regarding third-party transfers.

The United States does not trade with Cuba and keeps a tight rein on any technology transfers to China.

Israeli media reported last month that Washington had blocked a sale of technology to Venezuela to upgrade its F-16 fighters, which are made by Lockheed Martin Corp. and powered by engines made by General Electric Co. or Pratt and Whitney, a unit of United Technologies Corp.

U.S. officials have not confirmed the reports.

Chavez, a former army officer, made his statement during a ceremony to sign a contract with China to build a Venezuelan communications satellite and train Venezuelan specialists in China to manage the technology.

Venezuela, the world's No. 5 oil exporter and a key supplier to the U.S. market, was a traditional military ally to the United States. But relations deteriorated steadily after Chavez was elected in 1998.

Washington sold Venezuela 24 F-16 fighter aircraft in the 1980s when Caracas was seen as an ally against communist Cuba. It was unclear how many of the jets are operational now.

In constant tit-for-tat sniping, Chavez often accuses Washington of planning his assassination, while U.S. officials counter he has become a regional menace by using his oil revenues to finance anti-democratic groups in South America.

Venezuela still sells most of its crude oil to the U.S. market, but Chavez has moved to diversify economic partners by strengthening ties with countries like Russia, China, Iran and his South American neighbors.

In a sign of deteriorating relations, Chavez last year downgraded military ties with the United States by asking Washington to close down liaison offices at Venezuelan military bases.

Venezuela recently announced the purchase of automatic rifles and attack helicopters from Russia, naval vessels from Spain



Two F-16 Fighting Falcons fly over the San Francisco Bay, California. Venezuelan president Hugo Chaves is threatening to give the F-16s he has to Cuba or China. The US was once a military ally of the oil-rich nation, but since Chavez became president, relations have grown brittle. (Lance Cheung/U.S. Air Force via Getty Images)

[High-resolution image](#) (3000 x 2033 px, 300 dpi)

and military aircraft from Brazil in an effort to revamp its armed forces.

