

Alliances are only as good (and useful) as the threats they stand against



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Today I was reminded by a colleague of what makes for a good alliance.

I had recently posted an article on [LinkedIn](#) which suggested that following on from the problems encountered with Cuban, Russian and Chinese involvement in Venezuela, supporting the Maduro regime, that neighbouring Brazil should join NATO, because NATO was the ‘gold standard’ of alliances. The main thrust of this argument was that something definitive had to be done to stop Russian and Chinese strategic gamesmanship in Latin America.

My response to this suggestion was that NATO offering membership to Brazil might be considered a step too far for some. But let’s unpack this proposition for the moment.

Firstly, NATO, 70 years since its founding, can hardly be considered a ‘gold standard’ alliance. It might well have been during the Cold War when the existential threat of nuclear war hung over Europe and the world. But since the end of the Cold War, the Trans-Atlantic relationships that were the glue that held NATO together have dried up. The architecture looks old and irrelevant. NATO was designed to fend off a Soviet conventional or nuclear attack at a time when such attacks would have been largely unambiguous. Indeed, the threat of Soviet aggression was an overt threat. There was no room for second guessing what was standing right in front of you. Sadly, we do not live in that world anymore. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, NATO has struggled to redefine itself. NATO states are still largely dependent on US largess to keep their heavily reduced military establishments able to participate in American overseas deployments.

Secondly, strategic threats have morphed into the insipid and the stealthy.

Few countries today pose an existential threat to anyone anymore. However, they still pose threats. Because much of the global commons have an interest in preserving the international order, since to greater or lesser extents they all willingly belong to this order, the ‘sucker punch’ approach is the primary means of ‘getting at an opponent’. You want to apply pressure by stealth and surprise, but not enough to topple the system that still serves you. So, Russia and China, in spite of their political leaderships taking decidedly anti-US approaches to their international and strategic affairs will not take a completely revisionist approach to destroy the US-based system. Instead, they carefully seek out small-scale targets of opportunity to ‘push back’ against US power in order to reposition themselves closer to the top of the existing US-based post-World War II hierarchy. Rhetorical flourish and poor media reporting aside, we are not living in a time of great international peril, not when so many states, including those which boast of their anti-Western belligerence, have a stake in the contemporary order. And because of this, there are many non-kinetic options that avail themselves for use to hem in a contemporary threat. Wars, as they are structured now stay within clearly defined zones of combat and do not have the ‘spill-over’ effect they once had. Neither Russia nor China have the means, capability or the desire to manage the world, they simply want to shape it to their interests. Island building in the South China Sea or purchasing real estate in Finland for ‘uses unknown’ are not, nor will they be *casus belli*. And because

of this, Europeans seem happy to keep their militaries as ‘small rump’ forces that can be called upon for limited out of area operations in support of the United States. Indeed, NATO has effectively reduced itself to an auxiliary force, content with the status quo no matter what the current US president may think. Is this gold-standard thinking? No, it is modern real politik.

So, returning to our proposition, that the Maduro regime poses an existential threat to US interests in Latin America, and by extension, to those countries allied in one way or another to US power – is this enough to invite Brazil into NATO? Will Brazil’s sovereignty be defiled by Cuban, Russian and Chinese interests based in Venezuela requiring Brazil to fall under NATO’s Article 5? What will the Europeans say? Who will pay the bill for Brazil’s entry? Would Brazil automatically send forces into Europe to protect Latvia from Russian aggression? Or Germany from a reconstituted Islamic State threat? How would military, intelligence and logistics resources be distributed under this new arrangement?

As a bit of a ‘theatre of the mind’ exercise, such provocative articles are interesting. But ultimately they are futile since they are not based on the ‘reality of things’. NATO formed out of necessity to counter a global power, the USSR, which had its own alternative world view, and which was a revisionist power. Its existence was predicated on bringing into being an era Soviet global dominance and the complete destruction of the capitalist West.

Today’s Russia is a poor cousin to this former international behemoth and the People’s Republic of China may like to talk the talk but has neither the capacities nor the will to walk the walk. Beijing has no countervailing Communist-Confucian world order it wants to impose similar in scale and scope of Soviet Marxism. Its Belt and Road Initiative is a road/rail network – important for trade and only under the most favourable of circumstances. This complex infrastructure project can only exist unmolested in the sovereign territories it crosses by the grace of local autocrats, terrorists and other unsympathetic fellow travellers. The PRC’s rise to global ‘superpower status’ is certainly not guaranteed. As for the combined efforts of Cuba, Russia and China in Venezuela, fear not Brazil your own local military and intelligence services should be able to take care of things, and, if all else fails, Uncle Sam is only a phone call away.

No need to join the gold standard of NATO. The Europeans have enough problems to deal with without officially linking arms with Latin America.

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