

MADRID SUMMIT 2022 · NATO FACES A CHANGE OF ERA



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NATO, Latin America and Spain: Thinking the unthinkable

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The outlook seems very unfavorable to talk about the projection of the Atlantic Alliance outside the Old Continent and even less so to talk about its possible role in Latin America where the organization is unknown by many and rejected by a few others. In fact, NATO is facing a critical juncture defined by the rise of Russia's aggressiveness that has materialized in the aggression against Ukraine and the urgency of redefining the role of the organization in the new international scenario that must be resolved with the approval of the new strategic concept at the Madrid Summit, but it will still need further developments. So who needs to open a new front in a region that seems secondary to the concerns and needs of the Alliance?

Perhaps a first point to keep in mind is that, in reality, the Atlantic Alliance is already in Latin America. For starters, three NATO partners own territories in Caribbean waters whose security is covered by the North Atlantic treaty. Such is the case with Curaçao, St. Martin and other

smaller islands (Netherlands); French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Les Saintes (France); and Anguilla, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands and other territories (United Kingdom). In addition, the waters above the Tropic of Cancer – the entire Caribbean Sea – are also covered by the Alliance's founding treaty and its famous Article 5 promising assistance in the event of an aggression against one of the partners. Finally, in what was its most important move towards Latin America, NATO incorporated Colombia into its "Global Partners" program in 2017. In doing so, the alliance began a cooperation program with the Andean country in areas such as counterinsurgency, counternarcotics and humanitarian demining.

Of course, none of these issues contradict the fact that Latin America has been a secondary area for the Alliance. There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, after the end of the Cold War, the Latin American scenario did not harbor significant threats and certainly none of them contained the potential to destabilize the European and North American partners of the Alliance. On the other hand, the security problems faced, mainly linked to the emergence of large organized crime groups, could be dealt by the US alone. In fact, it was Washington that launched a robust program of military cooperation with Colombia beginning in 2000 and also promoted an ambitious agenda of collaboration against organized crime with a good number of countries in the Hemisphere. In this context, the European absence was almost total with the exception of some British initiatives, small in size, but sufficiently well conceived to have a relevant impact.

Two additional factors conspire against any attempt to expand the Alliance's presence in the region. On the one hand, the strategic urgencies in its immediate periphery have trapped NATO. These include not only the ongoing war in Eastern Europe, but also the chain of crises that are dotting the Mediterranean basin and greatly complicating the security of the southern flank. On the other hand, the growing political instability in Latin America threatens to erase with the stroke the slow progress to give NATO some substance in Latin America. In fact, Colombia's continuity as a Global Partner of the Alliance seems at serious risk after the new leftist government emerged from the polls last June seems to raise plans to give a radical turn to Bogota's traditional foreign policy that will likely imply a departure from the US and also from NATO.

Thus, Colombia's partnership with the Alliance is likely to end up in the same trunk of broken diplomatic artifacts where some U.S. attempts to escalate military cooperation with Latin American countries are stored. In fact, Washington has tried to build special security relations with some capitals in the region using the formula of naming them "Major Non-NATO Allies." This was the case with Argentina (1998), Brazil (2019) and Colombia itself (2022). However, this decision has not gone beyond being a political gesture that has had little practical translation. The lack of resources and the "third world" drift of Argentine foreign policy under the Peronist governments left the Washington-Buenos Aires collaboration in nothing. Traditional Brazilian nationalism and the lack of harmony between President Jair Bolsonaro and the Biden administration emptied potential U.S. cooperation of content. The prospects with Bogota are no better considering that the new Colombian government headed by Gustavo Petro not only promises to distance itself from Washington but also plans a radical cut in the defense budget.

However, beyond these difficulties, it is also beyond doubt that changes in the Latin American strategic scenario are creating new needs. Two issues are particularly key in this regard. On the one hand, the region is seeing the emergence of a form of militarized organized crime that goes beyond being a challenge to law enforcement and has become a threat to the stability of some states. This is the case of the large Mexican drug cartels, the so-called Clan del Golfo in Colombia or the First Capital Command in Brazil and Paraguay.

On the other hand, Latin America seems to have lost its "splendid isolation" that one day protected it from becoming a battlefield for the great powers. If during the Cold War and after the U.S. itself enjoyed absolute hegemony – with the modest exception of Cuba – this advantage seems increasingly in question thanks to the overwhelming economic presence and growing political influence of China accompanied by the expansion of the hemispheric presence of Russia and Iran. This is a rapid turn of the regional strategic scenario in which great powers hostile to US interests have found regional allies such as Cuba, Venezuela or Nicaragua that are facilitating their penetration.

So far Beijing's influence is limited to the economic and political spheres while the military activities of Russia and Iran are of a very limited scale. However, that could soon change. The People's Republic has contacted the governments of Namibia, Equatorial Guinea and Mauritania to explore the possibility of establishing the first Chinese naval base in the Atlantic on its

territory. That being the case, it should not be surprising that Beijing's maritime ambitions will soon be extended to Latin America, where it has enough economic weight to obtain important concessions from its partners. Meanwhile, Russia could expand its small groups of military advisers in Venezuela and Nicaragua as Iran vows to persevere in its attempts to increase its military cooperation with Venezuela and can persevere in efforts to make its naval forces sporadically present in the region .

The growth of internal instability in some key Latin American states, together with the emergence of militarized forms organized crime and the multiplication of the presence of hostile powers in the Hemisphere have special significance for the United States for the simple reason that they are occurring on the doorstep of its national territory. Traditionally, Washington has single-handedly assumed responsibility for ensuring the security of the region and has done so by building a dense network of military and police cooperation. A portion of these security assistance programs is the responsibility of two combat commands under the Department of Defense: SOUTHCOM (Southern Command) which is responsible for all of Latin America south of Mexico and NORTHCOM (North Command) whose area of operations includes the latter country in addition to the continental U.S. and Canada. So far, the work of both commanders – SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM – with Latin American countries has focused on the development of cooperation programs focused on combating drug trafficking and providing training to the armed forces. The other protagonist of U.S. security cooperation with the region is the INL (International Narcotics and Law Enforcement) Section of the State Department, which has gained increasing prominence as it is in charge of collaboration in the fight against crime.

In any case, both the orientation of the US strategy towards Latin America and the division of tasks between the Department of Defense and the Department of State seem to need readjustments in light of two key issues. On the one hand, the political-strategic scenario of the region has changed radically as a number of governments have emerged that not only are not continuing to pursue security cooperation with Washington but also behave in an openly hostile manner against American interests and are building close ties with US strategic rivals such as Russia and China. The list of countries includes Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and it is not ruled out that it will have new additions in the future such as El Salvador or Colombia. The

question, of course, is whether it is possible to maintain a hemispheric security strategy based exclusively on cooperation when a part of the region simply does not want to cooperate.

On the other hand, the diversity and dimensions of threats have been exacerbated and a purely policing approach seems increasingly incomplete. On the one hand, the aforementioned militarization of organized crime has exceeded the capacity of many police services, which has forced a good number of Latin American governments to systematically involve the armed forces in the fight against crime. The issue arouses suspicion among those who see such missions as inappropriate for the armed forces; but it responds to an indisputable operational reality: not many police forces are in a position to confront the armored vehicles produced by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in Mexico or the irregular warfare tactics deployed by the Clan del Golfo in Colombia. Seen in this way, it seems that the strategic dynamics demand that, without neglecting cooperation in police matters, the space for collaboration between the Department of Defense and those of its Latin American peers who are interested in receiving this aid for the fight against crime be expanded.

In the meantime, the U.S. will urgently need to develop a more muscular response to the increasing penetration of hostile powers into the Western Hemisphere. So far, efforts have been limited to diplomatic talks and offering opportunities for cooperation to reduce the appeal of Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Russian proposals. However, as the presence of Beijing and Moscow in Latin America extends into the security arena and their ties with the region's anti-American regimes become closer, it will be necessary to establish a military strategy aimed at containing the expansion of both powers. Washington may not be alone in this task. The growth of Chinese and Russian influence is also viewed with suspicion and caution by governments that fear their sovereignty will be compromised or are concerned about how the close cooperation of the People's Republic of China and Russia with some of their neighbors may affect their security.

Thus, the US will face a particularly complex scenario in Latin America over the coming decades. The region will include states with a wide diversity of positions vis-à-vis the U.S. While the Cuban and Venezuelan dictatorships are clearly hostile to Washington, countries such as Brazil, Paraguay or Ecuador continue to consider it their main ally. In between, other governments such as Mexico or Argentina retain more ambiguous positions, alternating cooperation in certain

areas with anti-American approaches in others. In the context of this diversity, the U.S. is going to have to face threats from a broad spectrum that include non-state armed actors with extraordinary capabilities such as Mexican cartels, criminal states such as Venezuela, and major powers with growing influence on the continent such as China.

The complexity resulting from the overlap of the political mosaic of Latin American governments and the variety of threats to be confronted will make it impossible to maintain a uniform strategy such as that developed towards Latin America during the past decades. On the contrary, it will be necessary to combine lines of effort aimed at combating militarized organized crime groups with a sustained campaign to reverse the most destabilizing actions of criminal dictatorships that have emerged in the region and a solid strategy to contain Chinese and Russian military penetration. The question is whether NATO and its member countries could be valuable partners in addressing these challenges.

The truth is that the U.S. has been trying for some time to find allies to share the burden of Latin American security. This has been the case with repeated U.S. attempts to build a special relationship with Brazil with a view to enlisting its support in ensuring the stability of the Hemisphere. The same can be said of the launch of the so-called US-Colombia Action Plan on Regional Security Cooperation in 2012, which provided the framework for Washington to finance the development of training programs by Colombian instructors for Central American military and police. This search for allies to promote hemispheric security is sustained by two reasons. On the one hand, Washington has wanted to surround itself with partners to dilute its image as a hegemonic power in the Hemisphere that has generated so much rejection among Latin Americans. On the other hand, the US military forces have sought the support of allies that would allow them to improve the effectiveness of their training programs due to their cultural proximity to the countries trained and / or have relevant experience in key tactics and techniques.

Against this background, the question is to what extent NATO can become the umbrella under which the US can count on European backing to confront the growing stability in a strategic space as important to its security as Latin America. What is certain is that this project of giving the Alliance a more active role in the Western Hemisphere would be consistent with the political-military transformation that led it to broaden its strictly European focus from the Cold

War to become the pivot of a global cooperation network that includes, among others, the countries of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Security Initiative, as well as those on the list of Global Partners. It can be argued that the war in Ukraine and the outbreak of confrontation with Russia will force a profound redefinition of the scope, members and objectives of this web of relations. But beyond the final configuration that the network takes, it is a palpable sign of the Alliance's willingness to play a key role beyond the territorial limits of its founding treaty. Under these circumstances, the increase in allied activities in Latin America should not be seen as an extravagance but as a follow-up to a line of expansion of the Alliance initiated long ago.

Similarly, one can criticize the proposal to extend the Alliance's activities to Latin America just when the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to demand all the attention and resources of the allies. However, it is precisely this scenario that could make it more advisable for NATO to look to the Western Hemisphere. The Ukraine crisis has revealed the extent to which European countries are militarily weak and dependent on the US to maintain their security. In this context, some sectors of isolationist dyes in the US Congress have criticized the financial and military attrition of Washington in Europe without any counterpart. A more relevant role for NATO in an area of special interest to the US such as Latin America would be a visible demonstration of solidarity with Washington and would help silence the voices among the US political class that are clamoring for a "decoupling" between the two shores of the Atlantic.

Clearly, the question is what form this allied collaboration could take. In this sense, there are two areas where cooperation could be relevant in the short term. For starters, there is the naval presence in the Caribbean aimed at strengthening narcotics interception capability. Currently, there is a small permanent naval presence of the British, French and Dutch navies whose anti-drug operations are coordinated with the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard through the Joint Interagency Task Force South based in Key West. In any case, it is likely that the naval deployment against drug trafficking will have to be reconfigured very soon if it is confirmed that Colombia's turn to the left after last June's elections translates into a reduction in its anti-narcotics cooperation with the US. This would imply that the Colombian navy would reduce its anti-narcotics operations by opening a gap in the Caribbean and especially in the Pacific where the flow of cocaine to North American territory would increase. As a consequence, the

deployment of new vessels will be necessary to restore control of maritime access to the US. In this sense, the Alliance could coordinate an increase in the European naval presence in the Caribbean that would allow the US Navy to concentrate on the surveillance of the Pacific corridor.

The second opportunity for NATO in Latin America has to do with the reconfiguration of training programs to the countries of the region. As mentioned, Washington has been looking for partners for these activities. Following training programs developed in Afghanistan through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and in Iraq through NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), the Alliance is in a perfect position to support U.S. efforts to enhance the training of its Latin American partners through the implementation of a multinational training program.

The development of such an effort would represent a gesture of solidarity on the part of European allies in a critical area for the US where common threats to Western countries such as Russia and the People's Republic of China are emerging. In addition, the incorporation of European partners would provide valuable support for the U.S. Southern Command in two ways. On the one hand, it could use European trainers specialized in critical areas – maritime interdiction, ship and aircraft maintenance, etc. – in which the Pentagon sometimes does not have all the necessary personnel to meet the demands of Latin American countries. On the other hand, it could benefit from the cultural proximity that Spain and Portugal have with Latin American countries and is proven to make training more fluid and easier to absorb by receiving countries.

The projection of the Atlantic Alliance would be an important opportunity for Spain and its armed forces. Most of the governments in Madrid have maintained security cooperation with Latin America as a minor issue – restricted to the police sphere and always subject to budgetary and bureaucratic constraints – to the extent that they hoped to win political gains from some governments in the region by remaining outside an issue that was considered thorny. This approach has placed Spain in an impossible strategic position. On the one hand, the U.S. has become frustrated with the partner it expected most from in a key space for its security. On the other hand, the Spanish position in Latin America has not benefited from this position since the countries faced with serious security challenges have resented the lack of support and many of those who have wanted Spain outside this area turn out to be governments such as the

Venezuelan or the Cuban with which the strengthening of relations is inconvenient due to its dictatorial nature. Finally, the vacuum left by Spain as a priority partner of the US in the promotion of Latin American security and stability has been filled by other allies and particularly by the United Kingdom, which has achieved considerable influence in a region that, in principle, should not be among its priorities.

The development of a NATO security cooperation effort with Latin America led by a U.S.-Spain axis could be an important step in strengthening the strategic relationship between Madrid and Washington while increasing Spain's security role in the region at a critical juncture. The truth is that a step in this direction would represent an important novelty within an Alliance that has ignored a strategic space that is paradoxically essential for its main partner. However, introducing such a change in the Alliance's global projection would be fully consistent with its aspiration to become a global security provider, a key project to ensure its relevance in facing threats that are European, but also global. Betting on such a change of course is one of the few advantages of the imperative need to adapt to a radical change in the strategic scenario. It is an opportunity to correct historical mistakes.