

Comment by Michael C H Jones

The Americas apart from the USA are usually forgotten by Australian journalists when discussing the Asia-Pacific or Asia geo-strategy. Canada occasionally is noted in the context of minerals and energy, Mexico for its drug gangster wars and more recently Brazil as a rapidly emerging economy. Argentina and Chile used to for their military dictatorships but not so often during their recent democracy years. Very seldom is there anything positive written about the rest.

The US embrace has been smothering for most governments if not the peoples of Latin America until the last decade excluding communist Cuba. Although rumblings of discontent have been frequent, and often produced media spectacular events, for half a century nothing terribly profound has taken place to shake the Yankee overlordship. But could things be a changing? Or are current stirrings just another false dawn?

The 6th Organization of American States (OAS) and the inaugural Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the OAS to be held this month in Cartagena Colombia excluding Cuba and the CELAC held last December in Caracas Venezuela excluding the USA and Canada, highlight newly formed and contradictory regional alliances not only in the Americas but throughout the Asia-Pacific. The on-again and off-again proposals for NAFTA to become a North American Union, the growth of Mercosur, the advent of the Trans Pacific Partnership within APEC and the evolution of the BRICS group are relevant not to mention the East Asia Summit and the G20, all of which have overlapping memberships.

The explosive dynamic of China's economic surge to the world since joining the WTO in late 2001 and its geo-political reach through a ruling Communist Party structure where all organisations, private as well as public, have committees and supreme legal allegiance is sworn to the Party, means at best a new form of Chinese Democracy is being taken to the world including the US backyard in the Americas. The connections are deepening and strengthening amazingly quickly. Party membership is by invitation and now numbers approaching 80 million. Western concepts of the State, Rule of Law, Free Elections and Global Norms are being challenged at all levels. The same processes are taking place throughout Africa simultaneous with the Americas, whilst in Asia the spheres of influence are being determined somewhat frostily between China and India including their rivalries in ASEAN, between the USA and PRC in Australasia, and with the EU and Russia being unknowns in terms of their present economic and financial difficulties.

Both the domestic and international expansion of China were predicted. I can remember arguing in the boardroom of TNT Australia in the late 1970s about a Chinese fishing village of some 30,000 called Shenzhen that had just been declared a Special Economic Zone. It was the first of 50 official Key City Cooperative Agreement signed by ACCCI, this one in the early 1990s. Shenzhen now claims 12 million residents and China has gone from about 100 million urban residents in 1978 to approximately 700 million today. Similarly members of the Australia Southern Africa Business Council and the Australia Argentina Chamber of Commerce cooperated during the mid 1990s to form a seminar group called SART, Southern Alliance Round Table, which organised three annual forums dealing with Australia and the potential of the Cairns agricultural group of countries*, China trade and economic challenge in the south, and the democratic potential of India for regional stability in the south. History does not travel in straight lines and it often takes decades but barring major wars there is a logic to both economic trends and democratic aspirations and their almost inevitable outcomes - relatively peaceful evolution to democracy or a sudden violent military dictatorship.

* <http://cairnsgroup.org/Pages/map/index.aspx>