

**BRAZIL****THE HEMISPHERE RISES**

**Brazilian leaders have traditionally been risk-averse, avoiding grand foreign policy doctrines. That's changed as Brazil seeks to assert itself on the world stage. What does it mean for the United States?**

**Matías Spektor**

**ONE FOOT IN  
THE REGION****EYES ON THE  
GLOBAL PRIZE**



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**R**EAD ANY BRAZILIAN FOREIGN POLICY COLLEGE textbook and you will be surprised. Global order since 1945 is not described as open, inclusive or rooted in multilateralism. Instead, you learn that big powers impose their will on the weak through force and rules that are strict and often arbitrary.

In this world view, international institutions bend over backwards to please their most powerful masters. International law, when it is used by the strong, is less about binding great powers and self-restraint than about strong players controlling weaker ones. After finishing the book, you couldn't be blamed for believing that the liberal international order has never established the just, level playing field for world politics that its



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supporters claim.

This intellectual approach is responsible for the ambiguity at the heart of Brazilian strategic thinking. On one hand, Brazil has benefited enormously from existing patterns of global order. It was transformed from a modest rural economy in the 1940s into an industrial powerhouse less than 50 years later, thanks to the twin forces of capitalism and an alliance system that kept it safe. On the other hand, the world has been a nasty place for Brazil.

Today, it is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Millions still live in poverty and violence abounds. In 2009, there were more violent civilian deaths in the state of Rio de Janeiro alone than in the whole of Iraq.

No doubt a fair share of the blame belongs to successive generations of Brazilian politicians and policymakers. But some of it is a function of the many inequities and distortions that recur when you are on the "periphery" of a very unequal international system.

The result is a view of global order that vastly differs from perceptions held by the United States. Take, for instance, Brazilian perceptions of "international threats." Polls show that the average Brazilian worries little about terrorism, radical Islam or a major international war. Instead, the primary fears concern climate change, poverty and infectious disease. Many Brazilians, in fact, fear the U.S., focusing in particular on the perceived threat it poses to the natural riches of the Amazon and the new-found oil fields under the Brazilian seabed.

Perceptions matter enormously. It is no wonder that the Brazilian military spends a chunk of its time studying how Vietnamese guerrillas won a war against far superior forces in jungle battlefields. Nor should it be a surprise that Brazil is now investing heavily in the development of nuclear-propulsion submarines that its admirals think will facilitate the nation's ability to defend oil wells in open waters.

But Brazil is nowhere near being a revolutionary state. While its leaders believe that a major transition of global power is currently underway, they want to be seen as smooth operators when new rules to the game emerge. Their designs are moderate because they have a stake in preserving the principles that underwrite Bra-

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zil's emergence as a major world player. They will not seek to radically overturn existing norms and practices but to adapt them to suit their own interests instead.

Could Brazilian intentions change over time? No doubt. Notions of what constitutes the national interest will transform as the country rises. Brazil's international ambitions are likely to expand—no matter who runs the country.

Three factors will shape the way national goals will evolve in the next few years: the relationship with the U.S., Brasilia's strategies for dealing with the rest of South America, and Brazil's ideas about how to produce global order.

#### WHEN IT COMES TO THE U.S., LIE LOW

**B**razilian officials are used to repeating that to be on the U.S. "radar screen" is not good. In their eyes, being the source of American attention poses two possible threats. It either raises expectations in Washington that Brazil will work as a "responsible stakeholder" according to some arbitrary criteria of what "responsible" means, or it turns Brazil into a target of U.S. pressure when interests don't coincide. As a result, there is a consensus among Brazil-

ians that a policy of “ducking”—hiding your head underwater when the hegemonic eagle is around—has served them well.

Whether this judgment is correct or not is for historians to explore. But the utility of a policy based on such a consensus is declining fast. You cannot flex your diplomatic muscle abroad and hope to go unnoticed. Furthermore, being a “rising state” is never a mere function of concrete things, such as a growing economy, skilled armies, mighty industries, a booming middle class, or a functional state that is effective in tax collection and the provision of public goods. The perception of other states matters just as much. And nobody’s perception matters more than that of the most powerful state of all: the United States.

Brazil’s current rise is therefore deeply intertwined with the perception in Washington that Brazil is moving upwards in global hierarchies. Securing the acceptance or the implicit support of the U.S. while maintaining some distance will always be a fragile position to maintain. But as Brazil grows more powerful, it will be difficult to accomplish its global objectives without the complicity—and the tacit acceptance—of the United States.

For Brazil this means that the “off the radar” option will become increasingly difficult.

#### NOT THE NATURAL REGIONAL LEADER

**B**razil accounts for over 50 percent of South America’s wealth, people and territory. If power were a product of relative material capabilities alone, Brazil would be more powerful in its own region than China, India, Turkey or South Africa are in theirs.

But Brazil is not your typical regional power. It has sponsored layers of formal institutions and regional norms, but its leaders recoil at the thought of pooling sovereignty into supranational bodies. Yes, Brazil has modernized South American politics by promoting norms to protect democracy and to establish a regional zone of peace, but its efforts at promoting a regional sense of shared purposes have been mixed and, some say, halfhearted at best.

Brazilian public opinion and private-sector business increasingly doubt the benefits of deep regional integration with neighbors, and plans for a South American Free Trade Zone have gone asunder. And yes, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 1998 to 2007, Brazil spent far more on its armed forces than Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and

Venezuela combined. Yet, Brazil’s ability to project military power abroad remains minimal.

The end result is that many challenge the notion that Brazil is a regional leader. From the perspective of smaller neighboring countries, it remains a country that is too hard to follow sometimes. If you are sitting on its borders, as 10 South American nations do, you find it difficult to jump on its bandwagon.

This is problematic for Brazil. As a major and growing regional creditor, investor, consumer, and exporter, its own economic fate is interconnected with that of its neighbors. Crises abroad impact its banks and companies at home as never before. Populism, ethnic nationalism, narcotics trafficking, guerrilla warfare, deforestation, unlawful pasturing, economic decay, and political upheaval in neighbors will deeply harm Brazilian interests.

Whether, when and how Brazil will develop the policy instruments to shape a regional order beneficial to itself remains to be seen. But curiously enough, Brazilian leaders do not normally think their interests in South America might converge with those of the United States. On the contrary, Brazil in the twenty-first century has geared its regional policies to deflect, hedge, bind, and restrain U.S. power in South America to the extent that it can. This is not to say that Brazil is a stubborn challenger of U.S. interests in the region. That would be silly for a country whose success depends on the perception of economic gain and regional stability.

But it means that future generations of Brazilians might discover that if they want to unlock some of the most pressing problems in the region, perhaps they will have to reconsider their attitude towards the United States.

#### BRAZIL’S IDEAS FOR THE GLOBAL STAGE

**S**ince its inception as an independent state, Brazil has been critical of the dominant norms and ideas about how best to achieve world order and a just international society. For generations, Brazilian strategic thinkers took a reactive approach to the ideas of global governance advanced by the core powerful states in the international system. Even if they never really produced radical criticism, the general tenor was one of resistance.

But reacting to ideas produced in New York, Washington, London, Berlin, Moscow, or Beijing will not do anymore. There is now a growing need for proactive, creative solutions to existing problems.

This is, in part, a function of Brazil’s newfound status:



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greater world power means greater, even burdensome, responsibilities. It is also partly a reflection of broader structural changes in the world. The assumptions of global order that were held to be sacred truths in the 1990s are now open to question once again, and they are under sustained challenge. Big questions of peace and war, collective security, intervention, hegemony, capitalism, democracy, and culture and identity are back on the table, and obvious answers are sorely lacking.

As a result, Brazil is under growing pressure to put forward its own distinctive ideas about global order in the twenty-first century. Doing so will be enormously challenging. After all, Brazil is not used to sitting at the main tables, or having to come up with ideas and policies to solve global problems. Adaptation will take time and will occasionally produce bizarre policy outcomes.

It will force Brazilian strategic thinkers to abandon rooted modes of thought that are now rendered obsolete by a new global reality.

Brazil's propositions for global order will have to win support in the marketplace of ideas. For this, Brazil's vision of global order will have to be modern and embedded in a language that inspires others. Doing this while remaining true to what is distinctively Brazilian is a tall order. Meeting this challenge will be a major test of leadership for Brazil.

While it is clear that success in the global competition of ideas requires skills that Brazil has yet to acquire, it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the degree to which profound ideational change is now underway.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

**I**n the period that coincides with the Barack Obama administration, the U.S. relationship with Brazil has deteriorated rapidly. Disagreements over Honduras, Copenhagen climate-change negotiations and U.S.-sponsored military bases in Colombia inflamed mutual distrust of each other's actions and motives in international institutions such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS).

The latest episode involving Brazil and Turkey's attempt to open negotiations with Iran over uranium enrichment illustrates the point. Criticism in Washington met defiance in Brasilia. Now the danger is very real that acrimony on both sides will turn into mutual indifference and low-level friction until the next crisis eventually erupts.

That would be a serious strategic mistake for both sides. The U.S. needs Brazil.

## Brazil's identity sits between the West and "the rest." In a divided world that requires cooperation to deal with daunting problems, Brazil can be a bridge.

On topics such as energy, the environment, narcotics trafficking, poverty alleviation, global finance, food, and regional security there is no way out: Brazil needs to sit at the table. Moreover, as a growing donor of international aid and as a contributor to peacekeeping operations, Brazil can help share the burdens of maintaining world stability.

In turn, Brazil needs the U.S. for its own reasons. Positive economic transformation at home will not suffice to see an emerging country through the difficulties that are bound to accumulate abroad. Without the military capabilities to impose its will, Brazil will need the support of a major established power to secure an environment that is conducive to its own rise. No major power today shares as many interests with Brazil as the United States.

Oddly, however, with a few exceptions, this is not what people of either country think. If you walk the corridors of power in Washington, what is often heard is that Brazil is a nuisance that the U.S. can afford to ignore. If you do the same walk in Brasilia, you will pick up similarly dismissive attitudes about the U.S., with the unspoken assumption that Washington will try to suppress Brazil's rise because it sees the country as an emerging rival.

**BOTH VIEWS ARE MISPLACED**

**O**n the fundamentals of global order, American and Brazilian interests converge. As the axis of power and influence shifts from the North Atlantic to the global South, the U.S. would be better served by listening to what Brazil has to say.

It is not simply that Brazil's economy will make it a more relevant voice in times to come. Brazil is a thriving multiracial democracy that willingly relinquished its quest for nuclear weapons. Its identity sits comfortably at the intersection between the West and "the rest." Brazilian diplomats may not share the U.S. view on a range of issues, but in a divided world that requires cooperation to deal with daunting problems, Brazil can be a bridge.

And the U.S. can facilitate Brazil's achievement of its goals. Brazilian leaders grew to political maturity during a period when national interests coincided with those of the Group of 77 developing states. The utility of such alignment remains a major force underpinning what Brazil does in the world today. Check out Brazil's behavior in the UN system and you will find that on many issues the division between the "white" powers of the industrial North and the developing world typical of the 1960s remains. But increasingly, Brazil will find itself at odds with its erstwhile friends.

Consider, for instance, the newfound frictions with other emerging nations such as India and China.

Today, more than any time in the recent past, it is in the interest of Brazil to keep its hotline with Washington functional at all times.

But Brazil and the U.S. are not natural allies, despite the fact that they share several interests. Little historical experience of active engagement with each other and deep bureaucratic resistance in both capitals will limit the pace and the scope of strategic cooperation. A working partnership—if it is to exist at all—needs hard work. Any effort to sustain cooperation will have to dislodge some deeply ingrained perceptions on both sides.

This is possible to achieve. Brazil is not—and will not become—a U.S. ally in the mould of Australia, South Africa or even Turkey. It will turn its back at the mention of a formal alliance, and it will seek to retain its independence.

However, as a major beneficiary of globalization, Brazil is not a challenger of the U.S. worldview. While Brazil will try to blunt the sharper edges of U.S. power by promoting multilateralism and multipolarity, it will not

undercut American interests.

On the contrary, it may well help to advance them in consequential ways. Brazil will seek to preserve the fundamentals of the existing order, even if it makes common cause with other rising power states on occasion.

Assisting Brazil's rise is in the long-term interest of the U.S. because a stronger Brazil will help tackle global problems that require deep cooperation and defy unilateral solutions.

Now with President Dilma Rousseff at the helm, the Obama administration should take the opportunity to think hard about Brazil. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent commitment to "constructive dialogue" with Brazil on the issue of UN Security Council reform—even if the U.S. is not ready to support a permanent seat for Brazil yet—is precisely the kind of attitude that is bound to succeed.

There are other areas full of potential too. The U.S. could extend an invitation for Brazil to take part in future talks with Iran. While Brasilia and Washington will retain their differences, having Brazilians at the table may help reassure the Iranians and facilitate dialogue with Teheran. Also, as transition from autocracy spreads in the region and Brazil's policies there expand, Washington will find it useful to have an open channel for candid dialogue with Brasilia.

Nuclear proliferation is yet another candidate for cooperation. As a major producer of natural uranium and owner of the technology to enrich it, Brazil is a big player in the global nuclear renaissance. Many in Washington insist that Brazil should sign the UN's Additional Protocols to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, even as the Brazilians have said time and again that they will not do it.

But Brazil is not likely to develop nuclear weapons any time soon, and it is not a proliferator. On the contrary, it is an example of how rising states can bind their own nuclear ambitions in deep sets of multilateral, bilateral and national rules and laws. Washington and Brasilia should start working on an ambitious nuclear cooperation agreement that can be a template for others in the future.

President Obama and his team have a chance to evaluate current policy with an inquisitive eye, then turn it upside down and shake it out of its current stupor. They should tone down the unhelpful Brazil-bashing that echoes inside the Beltway these days and instill a spirit of engaged curiosity and tough reflection about how best to move forward instead. 