Brazil and the challenge of reconstruction in Haiti

Under the administration of President Lula Brazil’s international role has expanded dramatically. Among other things, the country is now recognized as a member of the emerging BRIC group (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and was active in the most recent round of World Trade Organization negotiations. Although the negotiations collapsed at the last minute in August 2008, the Brazilian delegation signaled its willingness to work with the developed countries and World Trade Organization leadership to find a compromise solution.

It is clear that there will be no return to global trade talks without the active participation of Brazil and its developing-world allies. The international financial crisis that began in the United States in 2008 gave President Lula and Brazil’s financial leaders, in conjunction with those in China and India, an opportunity to demand a greater role for the developing countries in finding solutions to the crisis.

Brazil was instrumental in arguing for an expanded role for the G-20 nations (the world’s largest economies) and an end to the near-veto exercised for decades by the G-7 states (the major developed countries, led by the United States). In a series of summits in Washington, London, and Pittsburgh, President Lula was adamant in calling attention to the regulatory and other failures that provoked the crisis in the United States and in Europe. Indeed, Brazil was one of the last countries to enter the crisis, which the authorities handled with skill, and one of the first to emerge, relatively unscathed, in 2010. The president has made it very clear that he expects Brazil to be part of all major decisions taken to restore the health of the world economy.

Another sign — and now an opportunity — was Brazil’s decision in 2004 to...
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assumed the leadership of MINUSTAH, the United Nations peace-keeping contingent sent to Haiti after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown. This was Brazil’s first major commitment to international peace-keeping activities. By all accounts the Mission, led since its inception by a senior Brazilian Army officer, has been instrumental in reducing violence in the country.

Immediately after the earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010, the Brazilian government responded with a series of humanitarian initiatives. Although the country had lost 17 soldiers in the calamity, as well as a prominent social worker, Dr. Zilda Arns, the Brazilian government decided to increase the number of troops participating in MINUSTAH and authorized the Embassy of Brazil in Haiti to expend US$15 million in humanitarian assistance. Brazil also made significant contributions to a wide range of UN and multilateral aid organizations. Brazilian Air Force planes were deployed to transport Brazilian disaster specialists to Haiti. Tons of food, medications, and water were sent immediately, along with rescue dogs. An emergency portable hospital was assembled. The Foreign Ministry, sent a senior diplomat the day after the earthquake to coordinate Brazil’s role with other countries and agencies working to provide emergency relief. A Special Support Group (SSG) was created in the Brazilian Embassy in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic, to forward supplies over land, since the main port in Haiti was inoperable and the Port-au-Prince airport was seriously damaged.

Humanitarian assistance will continue to be needed for some time, and Brazil will remain a major player. Reportedly U.S. President Barack Obama has spoken with President Lula and indicated that his administration in Washington looks to Brazil to play a major role now and in the future. Other conversations between foreign policy leaders in the two capitals — and the visit to Haiti of the two foreign ministers — confirm the high priority being given to a comprehensive approach to Haitian recovery. While the immediate humanitarian crisis must be addressed, the longer-term need for national reconstruction must not be neglected. This is an opportunity for Brazil to take a leading role as the reconstruction of Haiti is planned. Having operated in the country since 2004, Brazilian officials are well known to the Haitian people and the authorities. Perhaps most relevant, the US should not take the lead in reconstruction efforts. The US is unpopular in Latin America, and the history of its involvement in Haitian history is highly controversial throughout the region. Brazil is viewed
by the countries in the hemisphere as a relatively neutral actor.

What is now needed is for a country in the region to take the lead in coordinating a multilateral effort to provide guidance for the long-term reconstruction. There is no better candidate than Brazil. The country has no “imperial” ambitions of the type the US is often suspected to have. Given the impressive economic and financial management of the Lula presidency, Brazil has the resources to offer significant amounts of money — in conjunction with many other donors — as it has done not only since January but since arriving in Haiti in 2004. A real challenge in Haiti will be the physical rebuilding of the country, and Brazilian construction companies are recognized as leaders in the field. Previous reconstruction efforts have been marred by corruption, little concern for building codes, and no thought to a realistic urban plan for the capital city. Brazil has the necessary expertise to guide this reconstruction differently.

The possibility of providing leadership in Haitian reconstruction would advance Brazil’s new foreign policy effort to build institutions to reflect the new global realities. IBSA group (India, Brazil, and South Africa) is a reflection of the new dynamic of South-South diplomacy. Brazil has also been in the forefront in creating UNASUR, the new Union of South American countries; and the recently established South American Security Council reflects a wider vision of Brazil’s expanding commitment to multilateralism.

The world community should welcome Brazilian leadership in the daunting task of helping Haiti re-create itself. Brazil has the resources, financial and human, to do so. To accept the role of leader would reflect the other impressive developments in foreign affairs under the Lula presidency. Brazil has been influential in trade negotiations and in creating new financial architecture. An expanded role in Haiti would build on Brazil’s experience since 2004 in protecting Haitian lives from widespread violence. The security role leads seamlessly into one of long-term reconstruction. The world community, and especially the United States, should move to approach the Brazilian authorities to discuss an appropriate way to carry out the reconstruction. It may be the UN. It will also require the participation of the Inter-American Development Bank and other financial institutions, and it will be crucial to coordinate the work of the many NGOs now active in the country. Lastly, effective diplomatic discourse with the government of Haiti will be essential. Brazil is uniquely prepared for this role. And it can do it with more tact and understanding than the United States.