Brazil’s ambitions and the new world order

Brazil, although for much of its independent history a reluctant member of the Latin American club, has always been a regional power. Comparing itself with the United States rather than with other Latin American states, Brazil played a leading role in the Pan-American Union (PAU) from its foundation in 1889. When the PAU was replaced in 1948 by the Organization of American States (OAS), Brazil — now more comfortable in its Latin American skin — was once again a leading member.

With US administrations having been distracted since September 11, 2001, Brazil has been very effective at filling the space made available at the regional level by greater US focus on other parts of the world. Brazil, which in the 1990s was tempted to consolidate its position in South America alone, is now heavily engaged in the Caribbean and Central America as well and is likely to remain so.

Brazilian engagement at the regional level is currently at a historic peak, helped not only by US priorities elsewhere but also by the self-inflicted wounds of Argentina, its once great rival. And though the outside world may focus on the histrionics of President Chávez, Venezuela is more like an unruly member of the family than a serious threat to Brazilian regional aspirations.

Leadership — Yet Brazil wants more. Starting in the 1990s, it began to aspire to a global leadership role. Although Brazil had played a very significant role in World War II and was one of only nine developing countries to join the GATT in 1947, its global leadership aspirations were of necessity postponed by a combination of inward-looking development, military government, and hyperinflation. It was only in the mid-1990s, when Brazil had finally tamed inflation, opened its economy, and consolidated its democracy, that a global role could again be considered.

Aspiration is one thing and achievement is another. Fighting for a place at the top table is not easy when those already there are not keen to share the banquet. However, Brazil has made impressive progress in 15 years. It is now a member of the G-20. It is also a regular participant at summits of the G-8, the club of rich countries founded in 1976 as the G-7, which Russia was invited to join in the 1990s. And if reform of United Nations institutions is ever agreed, Brazil is likely to join the Security Council as a permanent member alongside the five “official” nuclear states (US, China, Russia, UK, and France).

To the Brazilian elites and perhaps most Brazilians, all of this is self-evidently desirable. Brazil will be much better able to defend its national interests and shape the global agenda if it is at the top table. Future negotiations on climate change, for example, and the measures taken to mitigate the effects of...

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Global warming will be crucial for Brazil. But what do Brazil’s global aspirations mean for the rest of the world? To put it crudely, what is in it for all those countries whose support in the United Nations Brazil is so assiduously courting?

Many of the architects of the United Nations system hoped that it would be a step toward global governance and a step away from Great Power politics. Sadly, it did not turn out that way. The interests of the Great Powers were enshrined in their permanent seats with veto power on the Security Council, and the Cold War soon divided the permanent members among themselves. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War did not herald a move back toward global governance; instead it led to a brief period in which the United States thought it could change the rules of the game to establish global hegemony for at least a generation.

The Council — Most of the countries aspiring to a permanent seat on the Security Council would make little difference to the current world order if they were invited to join. Japan may not be a nuclear power, but its dependence on the United States for its security in the face of a rising China makes it extremely reluctant to play a truly independent role in international affairs. India, on the other hand, is a nuclear power acknowledged as such by the United States, but it is obsessed with security on the subcontinent and the threat of being eclipsed by China. In addition, India is the least progressive of all big states on the question of climate change and will be a drag on negotiations for many years to come.

That leaves Brazil, a non-nuclear state with an impressive international pedigree to its own credit. Having Brazil as a permanent member of the Security Council, with or without a veto, should therefore be very beneficial. Brazil has demonstrated on numerous occasions its independence from the current permanent members; it will work to free the world of nuclear weapons; it will be constructive on climate change negotiations; and it is not tied down by security concerns in its own region. Brazil’s permanent membership of the Security Council is something that the rest of the world should welcome.

I share this view — but a word of caution is in order. Like other aspirants, Brazil will not move to permanent status without serving a long apprenticeship in the rich man’s clubs. Yet these clubs (G-8, G-20, etc.) have no legitimacy in the eyes of many around the globe. These self-appointed unelected bodies, meeting under ludicrous security arrangements, pronounce at the end of each summit a long list of “promises” that are usually broken before the ink is dry. Brazil will not change the way these clubs operate. Yet it has no choice but to participate, for otherwise it will be branded a second-rate power. For Brazil’s sake we must all hope that the apprenticeship it is forced to serve on these bodies is a brief one, and that Brazil, once elected a permanent member of the Security Council, will no longer feel the need to participate in this G-circus.