Brazil and its regional challenges

The growing role of Brazil in summits of the G20 group, the IBSA trilateral (India, Brazil, and South Africa), and the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) has raised the issue of whether Brazil’s regional policy should remain as it is. One argument is that the sole privileged relationship should be the one with the US; another is that Brazil’s presence in South America should be reduced because it represents an obstacle to Brazil’s growing global role. Those mistaken conceptions overlook the historical and strategic elements of the horizontal and vertical axes of Brazilian regional policy.

On the horizontal dimension — South America — the agenda is to firm up bilateral partnerships and integration. These complementary efforts both point to strengthening multilateralism as well as building institutional consultation mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts, conciliation, and design of common policies; examples are the Mercosur Parliament, the South American Defense Council, and the proposal for a Bank of the South. Since 2000, together with introducing the initiative for Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA), Brazil has been playing a constructive role for development and for the reduction of asymmetries through BNDES (National Bank for Economic and Social Development) financing of infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, the summits between South America and the African, Middle Eastern, and Asian nations represent unprecedented initiatives. From a political, diplomatic, and economic perspective, those projects are evidence of the capacity of an emerging nation to contribute positively within the region and to strengthen its status. Yet it would be an illusion to believe that those initiatives are sufficient to eradicate once and for all neighbors’ fears, existing pressures, or competing initiatives.

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such as those of Hugo Chávez. Paragh Khanna’s *The Second World* expresses this dilemma of how Brazil should relate to the US and to South America: “Brazil is the equivalent of the US in South America (...). Latin America’s geopolitical ambitions depend almost entirely on that country.”

Clashes of interest and the defensive reactions of smaller partners are normal. They reflect domestic demands that tend to increase before elections or when the popularity of leaders is sinking. For pragmatic reasons, those interchanges — from trade disputes with Argentina to conflicts with Chávez or the demands imposed by Bolivia and Paraguay in terms of higher prices for gas and energy from Itaipu — should not be exacerbated. Agreeing on higher prices has been seen as “defeat”; nonetheless, in negotiations solutions stem from mutual concessions, from the more as well as the less powerful. If in the short run differences become severe, in the real diplomatic-strategic timeframes, the medium and long terms, conflicts tend to be resolved in acceptable terms for Brazil, which comes out as the South American stabilizing force.

As far as the vertical relationship with the US is concerned, this position was crucial to raise bilateral relations to the level of a strategic dialog. Because of the policies pursued in the Bush era, US action declined in the region; that, compounded with the Latin crisis in the 1990s, created power vacuums and fragmentation that led to mounting radicalism. In this space, the relevance of Brazil as a point of equilibrium increased. The adjustment was further aided by the understanding that US foreign policy respects nations that are sound and autonomous and conduct assertive diplomacy, like China and India.

From Bush to Obama, there have been frequent demonstrations in favor of these initiatives. Once again, the process has not been tension-free. Although the US recognizes Brazil’s political and diplomatic efforts in global forums and its balancing presence both at home and as a spokesman for the developing world, economic and trade obstacles still remain: the competition of agreements like NAFTA, CAFTA, bilateral treaties, and the FTAA (on stand-by); the stagnation of World Trade Organization talks; and the difficulty Brazilian competitive segments such as bio fuels, steel, farming, and meat have in accessing US markets. Strategic convergence does not eliminate actions that may affect Brazilian interests, such as the reactivation of the US Fourth Fleet in the South Atlantic, the installation of military bases in Colombia, or delays in reforming institutions like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund.

Even within the Organization of American States, opposing political views persist, as is evident in the disagreements over issues like the environment, international borders, immigration and human rights (not to mention concerns such as arms race, nuclear proliferation, and joint exercises like the ones carried out by Venezuela and Russia).

Difficulties do not, however, do away with partnerships, and differences between North and South should be seen as natural and part of a continuous maturing process. Over the course of history, no nation has been able to aspire to an active global foreign policy without a stable regional space. Brazil could not be — and is not — any different. If today the country projects legitimacy, credibility, and power in the global arena, that is because the hemispheric platform is supporting this new position.