

Rethinking Brazil-US relations

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WHEN IT COMES TO PRESIDENTIAL diplomacy, symbolic gestures can be more revealing than actual accords. For that reason, President Dilma Rousseff's state visit to Washington later this year should illuminate Brazil-US relations. To begin with, the fact that it will be a state visit—the highest form of diplomatic contact between two nations—is definitively a good start. As a sign of recognition of Brazil's rising global importance, President Obama's invitation will resonate rather well with Brasília's foreign policy establishment.

But beyond the ceremonial pomp, the visit will also raise expectations on both sides and create an opportunity for the two countries to reassess their relations. Despite the dynamism that tends to set the tone of cooperation in the private sector, there is a sense that the diplomatic engagement between the two largest democracies and economies in the Americas falls far short of its full potential. In the last two presidential meetings Rousseff was able to establish good rapport with Obama, but it was not enough to generate any substantial front-page agreement.

Some might argue that for Brazil, being under the radar or away from the spotlight is a good thing—it may be easier to avoid

disputes and achieve real progress when nobody is looking. Innumerable policy proposals launched by business communities in both the US and Brazil suggest that this appraisal may have elements of truth. By extension, a similar logic arguably suggests that somewhat more detached interaction between the two nations, at least from a geopolitical standpoint, could translate into less pressure over some of Brasília's foreign policy overtures, especially in the region.

So how to explain Brasília's deep-seated frustration with Washington's general aloofness or benign indifference toward Brazil? The short answer: prestige. But more generally, for a country that aspires to climb the ladder of global power, recognition or even support from the world's enduring "lone superpower" is vital. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to the dismay of Brazil's Foreign Relations Ministry, that while four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council have at one time or another showed support for or outright endorsed Brazil's bid to join the club, the US has demonstrated only an uncommitted and tongue-tied sympathy.

The truth behind this neutrality rests partly on the fact that Brazil's motivations for a greater international role do not resonate

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deeply enough in Washington's foreign policy establishment. Like its fellow BRIC countries, Brazil has attractive demographics and an abundance of natural resources. But unlike the other BRICS, Brazil is nowhere near the world's geopolitical hotspots. And Brazil is the only non-nuclear power of the original BRICs (before South Africa capitalized the S). And Brazil's credentials may be questionable in comparison to the four other candidates for permanent UN Security Council membership: Japan and Germany figure among the top three donor countries to the UN budget (Brazil is not even in the top 10); China is far ahead on geostrategic points, and having a nuclear bomb may enhance India's aspirations.

It is also possible that Brazil's aspirations have been stymied thus far by Brasília's deficient strategy for dealing with the US foreign policy establishment. The foreign ministry's principled approach to Brazil's role in a new and more equitable global order may be noble, but it does not translate well into Washington's geostrategic speak. Moreover, Brasília's efforts to emphasize the regional representation angle fall on deaf ears when many of the region's most important countries are expressing vocal opinions not only about rejecting Brazil's claims to regional leadership but also to garner disproportionate support from Washington interest groups.

This is not to say that Brazil should abandon its principled approach to foreign policy to seek a shorter—more friction-prone—path

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to the center of the US strategic field of vision. Neither should Brazil forgo its efforts to consolidate a more stable regional order and turn its back on sometimes disaffected neighboring countries. Quite the contrary. The country should maintain and even deepen those commitments.

But Brasília can learn from other Latin American nations and fellow emerging countries on how to engage with civil society, businesses, and academia to better defend Brazil's interests in Washington's policy circles. Good intentions alone do not do the trick. Money and research are vital to a long-term and coherent engagement strategy. While lobbying is frowned upon in Brazil—to put it mildly—Brazilian policymakers and businesses need to keep in mind that it is a legitimate and ubiquitous activity in the US. 

Brazil's motivations for a greater international role do not resonate deeply enough in Washington's foreign policy establishment.