# Finding the key to the Brazil-U.S. relationship

*Despite grand rhetoric, engagement between the U.S. and Brazil has been elusive. Part of the problem stems from differences in perception: The U.S. still approaches Latin America with a mentality left over from the cold war. Brazil seeks recognition from Washington as an emerging power.*

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Brazil is the key to Latin America," U.S. Senator Richard Lugar said last December. The observation of the Republican chair of the Foreign Relations Committee echoed that of another American leader four decades earlier. For President Richard Nixon, Brazil was the "key to the future" of U.S policy toward all of Latin America. Considering the ebb and flow of the relationship in the past few decades, marked by what some would call benign indifference, the analogy is somewhat puzzling.

Briefly during the cold war the U.S. government devised the idea of elevating bilateral relationships with several regional powers so as to share some of the burden of its global Communist containment policy. It is reasonable to believe, therefore, that the key-country reference was to Brazil's importance on Latin America's strategic chessboard. Recent historical accounts, however, suggest that, despite the ambitious rhetoric, engagement between the two countries at the time was rather elusive.[1]

Since the end of the cold war, Brazil-U.S. relations have been difficult to characterize with a simple label. Notwithstanding many shared characteristics and values between the two biggest democratic economies in the Western hemisphere, the bilateral agenda has been somewhat unambitious compared to other countries in the region or other rising powers. The fact that the similarities and possibilities for cooperation do not translate into substantive policies signifies, to some officials on both sides, a paradoxical discord.

Part of the problem stems from different perceptions. Brasília seems to have a hard time drawing attention from the American foreign policy establishment. Washington still approaches Latin America with a mentality reminiscent of the cold war. Brazil often perceives U.S. policy initiatives in the region as responses to other issues

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that alarm Washington — concerns about Communism and, more recently, about populist nationalism, terrorism, and the growing pull of China's economic presence often drive the U.S. Latin American agenda.

This perception, however, tends to distort political and economic nuances within the region. Many Washington policy initiatives that some countries see as promising opportunities are met with skepticism or even resistance by Brazil. Examples are free trade negotiations and, to a certain degree, military cooperation. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine Brazil having any influence over U.S. relations with Mexico, Central America, Colombia, or even Chile. It seems that the idea of Latin America still widespread in Washington policy circles is outdated. Since the late 1990s, for example, Brasília has pulled in its regional strategic boundaries to encompass only South America.

There are also obstacles on Brazil's side to deepening U.S.-Brazil relations. There is a fine line between a more assertive foreign policy and an anti-Americanism that easily creeps into the diplomatic rhetoric. In fact, one of the drivers behind Brazil's regional initiatives was the fear of American economic and military influence on Brazil's close neighbors. In part, that also seems to be the case with the country's more recent strategy to forge coalitions of emerging powers, such as the BRICS, to exert more global influence.

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Nevertheless, there is certainly room for progress when it comes to trade negotiations and cooperation in areas like technology and energy. But unlike other major economies in the region, Brazil does not seek a free trade deal or aid. When it comes to the U.S., Brazil's interests resemble those of other major rising powers, such as India. President Obama seemed to comprehend this when he said in visiting Brazil last March that it was time to treat engagement with Brazil "as seriously as we do with nations like China and India." Naturally that should set a positive tone for President Rousseff's visit to Washington this coming March. The currency between Washington and Brasília, therefore, is recognition. That is the real key that may open the door to a deeper relationship in the future.

[1] See *Kissinger and Brazil*, by Matias Spektor (2010).