Brazil and the U.S.: A lot to talk about

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At first glance, Brazil-U.S. relations seem to be booming. April began with President Dilma Rousseff's first visit to the United States to meet with President Barack Obama. Then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Brasilia to talk to Rousseff and the Foreign Minister, Antonio Patriota. A few days later U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta swung by Brasilia to chat with Celso Amorim, the Defense Minister.

In Washington, President Rousseff's agenda was more concerned with business than politics. Her trip was intended to underscore the importance of economic partnership at a time when Brazil is trying to respond to the effects on its currency of the global financial crisis by implementing policies to make its own industry more competitive. She and President Obama gave particular attention to agreements on educational exchanges, innovation, and energy cooperation. Rousseff left Washington not only with a stack of memoranda of understanding—ranging from aviation to food security—but also with U.S. recognition of cachaça as a distinctly Brazilian product (it was classified as rum before), a decision that will probably lower its tariffs.

In Brasília, Secretary Clinton and Minister Patriota conducted the Brazil-U.S. Global Partnership Dialogue (GPD), a mechanism for advancing cooperation and promoting shared interests around the world. This year's GPD addressed such areas as education, science and technology, social inclusion, human rights, and sustainable development. Later Secretary Panetta and Minister Amorim launched the U.S.-Brazil Defense Cooperation Dialogue, which deals with science, innovation, technology transfer, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, cooperation in support of African nations, cybersecurity, and defense support to civilian authorities at major international events.

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Photo: Roberto Stuckert Filho / Presidência da República

President Dilma Rousseff greets President Barack Obama during their meeting at the White House.

The succession of high-level meetings highlights the growing economic importance of the relationship between the two largest economies in the Western Hemisphere. With a US$60 billion trade flow in 2011, the U.S. is Brazil's second leading trade partner; it is an important market for manufactured goods as well as commodities. For the U.S., trade with Brazil produced one of its highest trade surpluses in 2011, US$11 billion. Investment and tourism numbers are also impressive. Therefore, despite the lack of a major trade deal, the economic engagement is promising.

More broadly, these meetings underscore the fact that the two countries share a mutuality of interests not only bilaterally but in the global arena as well. After misunderstandings related to Colombia, Honduras, Cuba, and Iran in the final years of President Lula's administration, Washington and Brasília seem to have established a more consistent framework for consultation. This does not necessarily imply a common view

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on all issues, but it does convey the idea that disagreements need not result in diplomatic squabbles. As a leading U.S. diplomat said not long ago, Brazil and the U.S. need to learn to agree to disagree on some issues.

Nevertheless, despite these positive developments, there is one issue where Brazil and the U.S. have not yet reached an understanding. Brazil's diplomatic "holy grail" is a seat at the Security Council table, and the U.S. is not likely to endorse its bid any time soon. According to foreign policy specialists in Washington, Brazil does not deserve a place in the top echelons of the U.N. because it is not a nuclear power and is unwilling to share the burden of leadership. Another argument is that the U.S. does not endorse Brazil's bid—as it did India's—because South America is not very relevant to U.S. strategy. Finally, there is the argument that such an endorsement could hurt U.S. interests with regional allies Mexico and Colombia.

Even if some of these considerations may hold elements of truth, ultimately they keep relations between the Western Hemisphere's two most important democracies from reaching their productive potential. Brazil could do a better job explaining to the U.S. (and the world!) how it would behave as a global power with a permanent seat on the Security Council. The U.S. could also rethink some of its arguments against that.

For example, the fact that Brazil is not a nuclear power and that South America is not a strategic region should count in favor of, not against, Brazil's aspirations. If the region is relatively calm, it is because Brazil and Argentina made a collective effort to end their economic and military rivalry in the 1980s. That rapprochement also defused the nuclear component of the rivalry, something that India and Pakistan have not been able to do.

The U.S. decision to endorse India's bid and ignore Brazil's sends a perverse message: It rewards a country that has snubbed every major nonproliferation regime, while punishing a country that has willingly adhered to all those regimes.

The question of whether Brazil deserves a place on the Security Council and whether it is capable of bearing the burden of global leadership is another story. It will certainly give Brazil and the U.S. a lot to talk about at any of the many strategic dialogue forums that have been created.