How Congress sees Brazil's foreign policy: Between the U.S. and China

Brazilian legislators differ in their perceptions on the importance of both the U.S. and China to Brazil. While China is predominantly seen as driving Brazil's economic expansion, the United States is considered a more reliable partner for political objectives. Yet there is no polarization between pro-U.S. and pro-China interests in Congress. What does this imply for foreign policy?

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There is little doubt that the rise of China has triggered one of the most dramatic changes to Brazil's foreign policy agenda in the past decade. A fellow member of coalitions that represent the interests of emerging countries, China has also become Brazil's main economic partner. As a result, from a relatively distant position on Brazil's diplomatic radar in the 1990s, China is now close to the center of Brazil's diplomatic strategy for the 21st century.

As new priorities emerge to join older concerns, they begin to crowd the foreign policy landscape. As with economics, however, the unlimited wants or objectives of diplomacy are constrained by a scarcity of resources. Sooner or later, choices have to be made. For many, it is expected that China's new and increasing role will entail a reshuffle of Brazil's relations with more traditional partners, such as the United States. How to balance the relationship with each country will be a major challenge for Brazil in the next decade.

It is always difficult to ascertain and then rank a country's foreign policy preferences. Though ambiguity does have its uses when it comes to strategy and international bargaining, beneath the intentional haziness of diplomatic rhetoric, preferences do coalesce into different, sometimes even conflicting, objectives. How to channel these differing preferences into a comprehensive strategy that benefits the country is a constant challenge for

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decision-makers. This is the general context that informs discussions in Brazil about the country's relations with China and with the United States.

If the intentional ambiguity of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry clouds the ranking of Brazil's international preferences, public debate usually exposes more definite interests that may conceal less mobilized — and possibly less extreme — opinions. For example, while leftwing elements in the current administration's governing coalition have exhibited anti-American rhetoric and an excessive optimism about the "strategic partnership" with China, a considerable number in the industrial sector embrace a more protectionist, anti-China, stance. Political compromise between these two camps is nearly impossible.

So how should Brazil's foreign policy strategists navigate the polarization of interests? China and the United States are not only Brazil's main economic partners, they are likely to continue to be the dominant global superpowers in coming decades. The results of an October 2011 survey by Instituto FSB Pesquisa of Brazilian legislators' international preferences may offer some clues. Nearly 40% of the members of Brazil's lower house of Congress answered three foreign policy questions:

- Is China a threat or an opportunity to the Brazilian economy?
- Which country should be Brazil's main trading partner, China or the United States?
- Which country should be Brazil's main diplomatic (political) partner, China or the United States?

The answers to the first question confirm a generally positive view of China's impact on the Brazilian economy: 57% see China as an opportunity, 27% see it as a threat, 13% see it as both. The numbers do not vary much across party lines; it appears that the government and the opposition share similar views on engagement with China.

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As to which country should be Brazil's main trading partner, the legislators favored China (43%) over the United States (27%) or both (25%). Here, the differences between the government coalition and opposition parties were much more dramatic. The Labor Party (PT) overwhelmingly endorses trade with China (68%) or with both countries (24%); no PT member favored the United States. The majority of members of the two main opposition parties, the PSDB and DEM, prefer trade with the United States (54%), although 43% still consider China (26%) or both (17%) important.

Curiously, though, the majority of responding legislators think that Brazil's main diplomatic partner should be the United States (52%) rather than China (27%) or both (20%). Although the pro-U.S. stance is much clearer among the opposition (74%), most of the governing coalition, with the exception of the PT, also prefer the United States to China.

What these figures suggest is that Brazilian legislators have quite different perceptions about the importance of both countries to Brazil. While China is predominantly seen as a driver of Brazil's economic expansion, the United States is considered a more reliable partner for other political objectives. More importantly, however, the survey seems to refute the idea of a clear polarization between pro-U.S. and pro-China interests in Congress. This suggests that it may be possible to build bridges between different interests, which arguably offers the Rousseff administration an opportunity to craft a more sophisticated diplomatic strategy to deal with both countries.