

The odd couple? Lula and Obama

TOO MANY MIXED MESSAGES

Public reaction in Brazil to the May 17, 2010 Iranian nuclear deal was euphoric. The media claimed that Lula da Silva had pulled off the diplomatic success evading Barack Obama and his friends in Western Europe. Truly, many Brazilians thought their country had arrived on the global scene as a mediator of note and a model of good international citizenship. The almost immediate public condemnation of the deal by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the subsequent rapid push of sanctions through the United Nations Security Council thus came as something of a shock to Lula and his foreign policy inner coterie.

As the Planalto presidential palace made clear by leaking an April 20, 2010 personal letter from Obama to Lula, Brazil had done exactly what the United States had suggested was appropriate at the White House nuclear security summit. Retreat in the face of US pressure was thus not just a question of wounded national pride, but also of political credibility for Lula and his Southern-centric nationalist foreign policy. All of this prompted commentators on the left in Brazil to opine that the United States should make up its mind about what it wants. The chattering class on the right wondered how the traditionally steady hands at Itamaraty, the popular name for Brazil's foreign ministry, had allowed Lula to involve Brazil in an issue that could only carry a downside, including possible retribution from its critical international partner.

Charges that the United States was giving out mixed messages by unfairly pillorying Brazil for simply doing as asked are matched by the poor fit between the rhetoric and the reality of Lula's management of its bilateral relations with the Washington. Lula's foreign policy was initially handed to his leftist Worker's Party to deflect attention away from his decision to maintain Fernando

BY SEAN BURGES

Sean Burges is the author of *Brazilian Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (University Press of Florida, 2009) and lecturer at The Australian National University and the Australian National Centre on Latin American Studies.

There is a temptation . . . to conclude that Brazil is close to being an enemy of the United States.

H. Cardoso's package of liberal economic policies. The initial result was a decidedly anti-American undertone to many of the pronouncements and initiatives emanating from the Planalto and Itamaraty palaces, including the advancement of South American and regional coordination mechanisms that explicitly excluded the United States and Canada.

LULA'S FOREIGN POLICY BRAIN TRUST

Two of the three key architects directing Lula's foreign policy-making apparatus have further confused matters for outside observers. Marco Aurelio Garcia, the special presidential adviser on foreign policy, is a Cuban-trained, wily Worker's Party backroom political operative who has consistently advanced a foreign policy strategy that seeks to put Brazil to the fore in the Americas. The current minister for strategic affairs, a small blue-sky-thinking ministry physically housed within a Defence Ministry building on the Esplanada dos Ministerios, is Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães. Previously, Guimarães was Lula's secretary general at Itamaraty (deputy minister of foreign affairs). Significantly, Guimarães was effectively suspended with pay during the

Cardoso government for being excessively critical in public of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) negotiating process, an agreement that Brazil had quietly worked to undermine from its inception. More tellingly, he is the author of nationalist foreign policy books such as *Quinhentos Anos da Periferia* (Five Hundred Years of the Periphery), which was mandatory reading for diplomats for several years after the start of the Lula presidency, and *Desafios brasileiros na era dos gigantes* (Brazilian Challenges in the Era of the Giants).

FRENEMIES? A NEW ROLE FOR BRAZIL?

There is a temptation to draw on the biographies of Lula, Garcia, and Guimarães to conclude that Brazil is close to being an enemy of the United States. Indeed, a host of analysts have drawn on similar logic and examples from areas as widely dispersed as the WTO and democratization in Honduras. After a coup removed the president from office, many wondered whether with friends like Brazil, Washington needed to worry about having enemies. The Honduran debacle aside, the reality of Brazilian foreign policy is somewhat different. While the rhetoric of the mercurial Hugo Chávez in Caracas remains vibrant, regular personal intercession from Lula has taken the edge off the Venezuelan president's regional adventurism.

Charges of a US-backed coup to oust Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti were significantly undercut by Brazil's rapid assumption of responsibility for the Minustah (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti) force. In all likelihood, the WTO Doha round would have collapsed shortly after the 2003 Cancun ministerial meeting without the North-South brokering role led by Celso Amorim, the Brazilian foreign minister. Potential destabilizing irritants in South

The odd couple? page 18

The odd couple? continued from page 17

America ranging from cross-border raids, through the granting of US access to Colombian bases, to the rise of leftist indigenous presidents have been contained through a busy mix of formal and informal Brazilian engagement.

THE STRANGE CASE OF CONVERGENCE WITH WASHINGTON

Underpinning all of this is the reality that the United States and Brazil share a common set of regional and global interests—namely, the spread of open markets and the prevention of state-threatening conflict and insecurity. While not a particularly new proposition, Lula's foreign policy team has taken concrete steps to advance regional cooperation and coordination with Washington despite the leftist credentials of key presidential advisers.

Although not widely publicized, the United States and Brazil signed a defence cooperation agreement in April 2010 to facilitate expanded regional security cooperation. A similar agreement is pointing toward Brazilian integration into the trans-Atlantic anti-narcotic arrangements through a Rio de Janeiro base that would coordinate actions with counterparts in Key West and Lisbon. Such increasing cooperation can be found in one of the key areas of Brazil's South-South engagement strategy in the form of a bilateral memorandum of under-

Nearly a decade of regional neglect has resulted in the Washington policy community having a very thin knowledge and understanding of Brazil.

standing with the United States on the provision of trilateral technical assistance to Haiti and some African countries. High-ranking government officials have greased the bureaucratic wheels behind these examples of bilateral cooperation with dizzyingly frequent visits.

WILL BRAZIL BE ANOTHER REGIONAL POWER LIKE CANADA? THINK AGAIN

Nearly a decade of regional neglect has resulted in the Washington policy community having a very thin knowledge and understanding of Brazil, which has prompted the creation of a cross-government Brazil study group. Thus, while there is an awareness that Brazil matters as an "emerging power," the implicit assumption at times appears to be that

Brazil might be some kind of a "new" Canada. There will be the odd symbolic policy difference, but not on issues that matter, and those differences that do exist will serve to keep an underground route of engagement open. The difference is that Brazil does not have anything approaching Canada's dependence on the US market or Washington's political goodwill. In practical terms, this means that the Lula government's pursuit of a foreign policy independent of US acquiescence can sometimes appear as a departure from the almost neighbourly cooperation that appeared the norm during the Cardoso years.

A HEIGHTENED GLOBAL INVOLVEMENT AND ITS PROACTIVE POLICY

These instances of angst and misunderstanding matter for Brazil, as demonstrated by the Brazilian decision not to implement WTO-allowed trade penalties against the United States in the wake of the June United Nations Security Council Iranian sanctions vote. Despite consistent efforts to advance a new economic geography and a sense of Southern political solidarity, Lula's foreign policy team remains highly cognizant that while US power and influence may have declined, it remains a considerable force, and Washington retains the ability to retard or even derail Brazil's regional and global policies.

The Brazilian response to this situation is to go on the offensive with a policy approach that is centred on Brazil's interests in cooperation with Southern partners. This highly flexible tack is in keeping with Lula's hallmark pragmatism, neither for nor against the United States, a nuanced approach that few Beltway insiders predicted. This highly nuanced strategic policy stance spells continued public confusion in a bilateral relationship, which is kept from going off the rails by the practical work of officials in both countries, and Brazil's heightened awareness of the changes in world economy geography. 



The North-South Institute

The North-South Institute is an independent Canadian policy research institution that specializes in international development with a particular focus on reducing poverty and global inequities. It conducts applied development research in partnerships with leading Southern and Canadian research institutions and independent scholars. Related information to this project of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies of York University and LATN/FLACSO on Post-neoliberal Latin America and the Shadow of Obama can be found at:

Dialogue on Canadian-Latin American Economic Relations

<http://www.nsi-ins.ca/english/research/progress/79.asp>