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The strategic importance of Brazil

By *Evan Ellis* / [🐦REvanEllis](#) / *October 31, 2017*

Last week, I was in Rio de Janeiro for a series of engagements at Brazil's prestigious Naval War College. The pinnacle event of my trip—a conference on China attended by almost 500 Brazilian officers and civilians—highlighted how much the strategic environment of Latin America has changed, and with it the importance of Brazil in China-Latin American affairs.



As I sat in the front row, with a group of Brazilian Admirals, China's Charge d'affaires in Brazil, Song Yang, extolled his country's achievements and shared the highlights of last week's 19th Communist Party Congress. It's hard to say which of these impacted me more,

Song Yang's dynamism and fluent Portuguese, or the respectful seriousness with which my Brazilian hosts considered the opportunities offered by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Since 2003, Chinese companies have invested \$46.8 billion in Brazil across 87 projects—far more than in any other country in Latin America. Less known, however, is the fact that Brazil is increasingly becoming a significant military partner for China in the region. Soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have attended Brazil's internationally renowned jungle warfare school in Manaus, putting the school in an elite club in the region, joined by Colombia's Lanceros course. The experience was reportedly so positive that a delegation from the school traveled to China to discuss helping the PLA to set up its own school in the south of China. The PLA also served for 8 years, from 2004 through 2012, in the Brazil-led United Nations peacekeeping force in Haiti, MINUSTAH.

While Brazil, like other nations in the region, regularly sends small numbers of personnel to China's National Defense University for short courses and diplomatic tourism, the Brazilian Navy has gone further, sending its officers to the year-long commander's course in Nanjing.

Brazil—which has its own defense industry—has not bought large quantities of Chinese military equipment, as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru have. But it has bought an Antarctic research ship from the Chinese, and Chinese defense companies are strong contenders for important Brazilian defense procurements. China Shipbuilding Industrial Corporation (CSIC), for example, is one of the contenders in the initial phase of the Brazilian Navy's acquisition of a new frigate. The China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation

(CASIC) is similarly bidding for a role in SisGAAz, the Brazilian military's integrated system to secure its maritime border.

The U.S. "Brazil Myopia"

As the U.S. works to advance its policy objectives and interests in the Western Hemisphere, the enormous potential of Brazil as a partner, and the cost of ignoring it, is often overlooked.

Brazil accounts for approximately half the population, territory, and economic product of South America. Brazil's military is larger than the rest of the Armed Forces on the continent combined, and its domestic arms industry is a major supplier to many of its neighbors. Yet Brazil does not fit readily into the traditional U.S. concept of "partners" in a region in dire need of institutional reform. Brazilians, like their U.S. counterparts, have a deeply rooted belief in their country's exceptionalism; the U.S. insistence in lumping Brazil together with the smaller Spanish-speaking nations of the Americas and the islands of the Caribbean is a longstanding source of Brazilian annoyance.

But while senior U.S. officials responsible for Latin America in the State Department and the Department of Defense certainly have Brazil on their radar, there is a tendency in U.S. political leadership and among U.S. analysts and scholars not to give Brazil its due.

Prior to the elevation of Major General Ricky Waddell to Deputy National Security Advisor to President Trump, it was difficult to name

a person at the highest level of the U.S. government who truly understood Brazil. On the other hand, in U.S. academic institutions, the number of senior Brazil experts is limited. Latin Americanists, including myself, often focus almost exclusively on the Spanish-speaking part of the region, impaired by the inconvenience of investigating the institutionally and culturally distinct, Portuguese-speaking nation. While analysts and scholars more broadly discuss the “BRICS” forum (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), such work seldom seriously considers the role of Brazil individually as a global strategic player.

In contrast to the U.S., the PRC does not suffer from the same myopia. It has recognized Brazil as a “strategic partner” since 1993, and makes good use of its tie to Brazil through the BRICS forum to advance international diplomacy, as well as commercial initiatives such as the “New Development Bank” (BRICS Bank). Indeed, as noted previously, Brazil has consistently been one of the first places that Chinese leaders, businessmen and strategists look as the PRC expands its relationship with Latin America.

Given the economic, military, and political weight of Brazil, the nation’s growing engagement with the PRC highlights the enormous risk, and lost opportunity of overlooking Brazil as a strategic actor and a potential partner in the region.

Brazil’s complex alignment with the U.S.

As a major regional power, Brazil has historically rebelled against U.S. dominance of the economic, political and security regime of the Americas, even while it has partially identified with, and benefitted

from it. After Brazil was drawn into World War II by the persistent sinking of its merchant ships by the Nazis, it subsequently played an important role in the allied fight to liberate Italy, laying the groundwork for the nation's security alliance with the U.S. at the outset of the Cold War. It was arguably this accident of history that created the erroneous impression within decision-making circles in the United States that Brazilian strategic interests coincided with those of the U.S. more than they did.

Throughout their modern history, Brazilians have identified with concepts of democracy, human rights, and Western institutions shared by the U.S., even while expressing disdain for U.S. behavior. During the 1960 and 1970s, Brazilian academics and politicians were leaders in the movement to escape dependence on a U.S.-led economic system through autonomous development. Brazil's foreign ministry and public universities have often been filled with anti-U.S. sentiment, with the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) helping to launch the infamous São Paulo forum of leftist organizations.

Brazil has frequently worked against U.S.-led initiatives in the region, from opposing the Free Trade Area of the Americas, to tacitly (and sometimes not so tacitly) supporting the anti-U.S. initiatives of smaller regional players such as Venezuela. While Brazil has played an important role in the United Nations and institutions of the inter-American system, the perception that a U.S. presence dilutes the influence of Brazil as the largest actor in South America, has contributed to a preference of the Lula da Silva and Rousseff governments for regional institutions which exclude the U.S., such as UNASUR and CELAC. There are few other places in the region where

a North American can feel simultaneously embraced, and held at a distance, as in Brazil.

While the interests of the U.S. and Brazil in the Americas and the broader world only partially coincide, the political opening provided to the United States by the relatively conservative government of Michael Temer provide an opportunity for the United States to strengthen its strategic partnership with Brazil around cooperation on security and defense issues that advances the strategic interests of both nations. Under President Temer, Brazil has taken a notably more critical stance on regional threats such as Venezuela, and quietly moved away from advocacy of institutions such as UNASUR and CELAC that challenge the U.S. strategic position in the region. While President Temer is deeply unpopular in the polls—and while his coalition in the Brazilian Congress has lost considerable strength—his recent ability to prevent key corruption investigations against him from going forward, whether founded or not, suggest that the U.S. will continue to have the opportunity in the short term to work with President Temer to strengthen the strategic partnership with Brazil.

Building a Brazil-U.S. partnership around security cooperation

As during World War II and the Cold War, some of the most fruitful areas for strengthening the U.S.-Brazil partnership involve security cooperation, and coordination on regional issues where U.S. and Brazilian interests coincide.

In the economic arena, there are many opportunities for collaboration between U.S. and Brazilian companies, but at a government-to-government level, the serious economic crisis from which Brazil is

emerging should not be confused with a need for development aid. Similarly, while Brazil's unfolding corruption scandals expose defects in the nation's politics and government bureaucracy, they also highlight the independence of its judiciary and the resilience of Brazilian institutions. Simply put, U.S. State Department-led "whole-of-government" programs for strengthening governance in the region are not what is most needed in Brazil, nor would most such programs likely be well received given Brazil's deep rooted national pride and spirit of independence.

Instead, for multiple reasons defense collaboration is an ideal vehicle for building confidence between the two nations in a mutually respectful relationship. While there are certainly militaries in the region friendlier to the U.S. than Brazil, its armed forces are a mature, conservative institution with professional respect for their U.S. counterparts; the groundwork for collaboration is already in place.

Given this basis, the size and technical sophistication of the Brazilian Armed Forces creates multiple opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and sharing of perspectives (as opposed to traditional U.S. training and assistance). The type of complex combined-arms operations that the Brazilian Armed Forces engages in and prepares for means that U.S. capabilities in areas such as modeling and simulation, wargaming and exercises, doctrine development and professional military education are particularly relevant for Brazil. The U.S. has much to learn from the potential collaboration as well. Indeed, there are multiple areas where the U.S. military could gain insight from its Brazilian counterparts, including jungle warfare, U.N. peacekeeping missions, and operating in complex urban environments, leveraging

Brazil's experiences deploying in favelas (urban slums) such as the Alemão and Maré complexes, and, most recently, Rocinha.

Brazil also has the resources and personnel to justify expanded exchanges of officers to study in and teach at each country's senior professional military institutions, including the U.S. Army and Navy War College.

In the operational sphere, there are opportunities for the U.S. to collaborate with Brazil in technical capabilities, intelligence sharing, and border management. Brazil's extensive borders touch on almost every criminal challenge currently threatening South America, including drug flows into Brazil from Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay. Similarly, a U.S. role with Brazil in its exercises and expanded security collaboration with Colombia and Peru could advance the fight against transnational criminal challenges affecting those nations, such as former FARC rebels and members of criminal bands operating in Brazil.

A particularly important area for expanded U.S.-Brazil cooperation is Venezuela. In addition to coordination on the political response to the unconstitutional appropriation of power, human rights abuses, and conduct of criminal activities by the Maduro regime, the U.S. should explore opportunities to expand information sharing regarding Venezuelan refugees coming into Roraima state, as well as into Brazil's neighbors, such as Colombia, Peru, and Guyana. As Venezuela's largest neighbor and as a regional leader, Brazil also has an interest in collaborating with the U.S. regarding the appropriate security and humanitarian response if Venezuela collapses.

Finally, Brazil potentially has an important role to play in helping the U.S. understand illicit Islamic networks operating in South America, especially given that a number of these networks, such as that involving the Iranian diplomat and extremist recruiter [Mosheen Rabbani](#), have demonstrated [ties to Brazil in the past](#).

With respect to Brazil's relationship with China, the U.S. cannot and should not prevent Brazil from maintaining political, commercial and security relationships with whom it wishes. But by conducting its own respectful, positive engagement with Brazil, the U.S. can strengthen the hand of those in the Brazilian government who argue for caution in dealing with China, and who rightfully argue that Brazil's long-term strategic interests are best built around the foundation of a strong bond with the U.S. (even while maintaining relationships with others), as well as a dedication to values which both societies share values, such as pluralistic democracy and free speech, respect for human rights, and rule of law.



The views expressed in this work are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent his institution.

The author thanks those Brazilian academics and military officers who helped him to understand the strategic importance and situation of Brasil, including Rear Admiral Marcio Magno de Farias Franco, Capitan (Ret.) Claudio Rogerio de Andrade Flor, Capitan (Ret.) Claudio Rodrigues Correa, and Capitan Marcelo Santiago Villas-Bôas (Ret.).

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