

# Brazil's New Role

By Emily Felt



Photo by Ricardo Stuckert/PR.

President Lula poses with the presidents of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Venezuela, among others, at a 2005 Mercosur summit meeting.

“Relations between the United States and Latin America today are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War,” wrote Peter Hakim in a 2006 article for *Foreign Affairs*. Brazilian Ambassador to the United States, Roberto Abdenur, dedicated his talk at CLAS to dispelling this idea. Relations between the U.S. and Brazil are currently “at a high point, not a low point,” he maintained. While Brazil continues to have differences of opinion with the United States on issues like the invasion of Iraq, the environment and the International Criminal Court, the relationship between the two countries is positive. As evidence of collaborative efforts by the two nations he pointed to the current bilateral dialogue around economic issues, United Nations reform, security in the Americas and joint initiatives in Africa.

Since the election of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002, Brazil’s foreign policy has focused on establishing ties with countries around the world. With its large economy and sizeable population, Brazil has become an economic force with more bargaining power than its Latin neighbors. Brazil played an important role in the Doha meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and has made progress in bringing Latin American countries together on social and economic issues. This suggests to some that Brazil is taking on a leadership role within Latin America that might interfere with its relationship with the U.S. In the past, the United States has not looked fondly on solidarity among Latin American states, and there is some criticism that Brazil is not focusing on the U.S. as it should.

Ambassador Abdenur maintained that what some see as “leadership” is simply Brazil looking out for its own best interests which does not detract from its relationship with the U.S. While Brazil’s independence could be perceived as a threat to U.S. hegemony, the ambassador argued that Brazil, like any other nation, must reach out to the world on economic and social matters. While clearly a part of the Third World and committed to the “idea of Latin America” as a concept, Brazil has no intention of strengthening the collective power of Latin America to the detriment of the U.S. According to Abdenur, Brazilian and U.S. interests converge economically, socially and strategically, and their relationship is characterized by the incentive of both countries to work together on common interests.

Economically the two countries have every reason to collaborate. Brazil has entered a time of relative social and economic stability when viewed in the context of its turbulent past. This period of stability can be attributed both to trends begun by past administrations and to the important role Lula played in gaining the confidence of international investors after his election. One of Lula’s strengths going into the upcoming presidential elections is his record on economic policy, which gives little political ground to the opposition. Lula did not, as analysts had suspected, abandon market mechanisms to pursue his social agenda. He was able to maintain confidence in the Brazilian economy while launching domestic social programs.

Increasingly, the United States and Brazil are becoming economically interdependent. The U.S. is Brazil’s most important trading partner; trade both ways tops \$40 billion. Brazil is also starting to invest in the United States. Abdenur mentioned that his country still needs to maximize its comparative advantage to make inroads with U.S. consumers. Because Brazil was a latecomer to the arena of international trade, there are still markets to be tapped in the United States, and this is an area that Brazil will need to address in the future in order to continue its growth.

On issues of international security and cooperation, the two countries have had some

differences of opinion. However, even after disagreements on issues like the International Criminal Court, the illegal invasion of Iraq and the environment, the ambassador characterized the relationship between George Bush and President Lula as one with “chemistry.” During President Bush’s visit to Brazil, Lula detailed the many issues on which the two countries converge. Bringing stability to Haiti is of interest to both countries as is a joint program by which Brazil and the U.S. will collaborate to foster democracy and good governance in Guinea Bissau, one of Africa’s poorest countries. Although Abdenur did not comment on how this initiative would be implemented, he pointed to the political and symbolic significance of the initiative which might serve as the impetus for future collaboration.

Ambassador Abdenur ended his discussion on a frank note. The U.S. is a hegemonic power, and as such, sets the agenda on economic, social and human rights issues. Brazil does not have the same luxury. However, it has become a nation that is indispensable in defining the terms on which the agenda will be set. This comes at a time when Brazil has begun to play an important role in bringing other nations to the table to dialogue. The Bush administration has faced criticism for its singular focus on the Middle East while neglecting its long ties with Latin America; hence the title of Mr. Hakim’s Foreign Affairs article: “Is Washington Losing Latin America?” Brazil might be the partner that the United States needs to get Latin America back and on terms more equitable for all. President Lula’s dialogue with George Bush has helped build a relationship of collaboration between the two nations, creating a potentially powerful alliance for the future.

[Brazilian Ambassador to the United States, Roberto Abdenur, spoke at UC Berkeley on March 9.](#)

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