

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The United States Needs to Focus on Its Own Hemisphere

Ted Galen Carpenter

February 16, 2016

The United States remains the leading power in the Western Hemisphere by a wide margin. Much of the speculation, so prevalent a few years ago, about the rise of new major powers in the world as diplomatic, economic and even strategic competitors to Washington has justifiably faded. That is especially true of the so-called BRICS nations—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—that were supposedly poised to become decisive economic and diplomatic actors. Speculation about Brazil’s new status and role especially proved to be both premature and excessive. That country, along with the other BRICS, encountered a variety of domestic limitations and obstacles along the way. And as a major commodities exporter, Brazil’s problems have only deepened with the global plunge in commodity prices.

Nevertheless, the current position of such hemispheric neighbors as Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Mexico is a far cry from their positions as third- or fourth-rate powers a couple of generations ago. Mexico is now Washington’s third largest trading partner, while Brazil stands at number twelve—before the oil price collapse, it had reached number nine.

Washington’s policies need to catch up to the new reality.

The Obama administration’s response to the ambitions of Brazil and other midsize hemispheric powers has sometimes been brusque and unhelpful. Washington’s displeasure is especially apparent regarding their diplomatic ambitions on issues outside the hemisphere. That point became glaringly evident in May 2010 when Brazil and Turkey engaged in a joint initiative to foster more productive negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. That effort appeared to be working when Brasilia and Ankara won a commitment from Tehran to ship half of its enriched uranium to Turkey.

Yet Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seemed to go out of her way to squelch the initiative, stating bluntly to Brazil and Turkey that “we think the Iranians are using you.” That comment, in turn, brought a sharp retort from Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Brazilian President Lula da Silva, who stated that the framework accord with Tehran “was a diplomatic victory, and those countries that criticize us are merely envious.” Washington’s handling of the episode appalled some critics. *Nation* correspondent Robert Dreyfuss stated that the Obama administration “has deeply alienated two very important countries, making a mockery

of Obama's pledge to elevate diplomacy and bridge-building as the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy."

U.S. leaders have not been much better handling other issues impacting the prestige of Brazil and other significant hemispheric powers. Washington has shown little enthusiasm for Brazil's ambition to gain a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. And U.S. support has been tepid, at best, for Mercosur, the so-called Common Market of the South, the economic association created in 1991 by Argentina, Brazil and other countries. That stance did not change significantly during the Obama years.

Obama administration officials—and especially officials in the incoming administration—must do better in dealing with midsize hemispheric powers. As part of a new, more enlightened approach, Washington also must address more seriously such topics as environmental preservation and other nontraditional foreign policy issues that key neighbors—as well as some smaller countries in the hemisphere—deem important. Above all, U.S. officials need to accept the reality that Latin American countries are no longer as willing as they once were to defer to Washington's policy preferences.

That means that U.S. leaders must learn to operate with greater subtlety and finesse. The State Department's boorish response to the 2010 Brazilian-Turkish initiative regarding Iran is a textbook example of how Washington should not act. It may be possible to be brusque and dismissive with small, weak countries (although it is seldom wise to do so), but it is folly to behave that way toward serious midsize powers—especially important neighbors.

U.S. officials ought to guard against arrogance for multiple reasons, not the least of which is China's growing interest in Latin America. Alienating Brazil, Chile and other emerging players could become a catalyst for close strategic and economic ties between Beijing and those countries—which it is safe to say Washington would not relish. Beijing's increasingly evident courtship of Brasilia ought to especially concern U.S. policy makers. Since China has now become Brazil's largest trading partner, the development of extensive bilateral strategic ties is not a far-fetched notion.

At a minimum, the incoming administration needs to treat such hemispheric powers with greater consideration and respect. It could even go beyond that point and take additional steps to support key diplomatic objectives of those countries. One example would be to push for a permanent "South American" seat (with veto power) on the UN Security Council that might rotate among Argentina, Brazil, Chile and perhaps Colombia.

The problems with Washington's hemispheric policy is part of a more widespread malady. The United States needs to relearn the art of diplomacy—how to operate in an international system where, powerful as it is, it cannot always dictate outcomes. That is a skill that American officials have rarely had to utilize in the long decades since World War II. The reeducation process should begin in the Western Hemisphere—and it should be immediately.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the National Interest, is the author of 10 books and more than 600 articles on international affairs.