



Obama und Rousseff - end of the freeze?

By Jan D. Walter
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Ever since the NSA's spying on Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff came to light, relations between Brasilia and Washington have been particularly icy. The G20 meeting in Australia brought the leaders face to face.

For more than a year, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff has been waiting in vain for an apology from her American counterpart Barack Obama. It was over twelve months ago when the story broke that the NSA had spied not only on Brazilian businesses and citizens, but also on the president herself.

Unlike German Chancellor Angela Merkel, no one suspected Rousseff of feigning her outrage. She immediately cancelled her planned state visit to the White House in September 2013. Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and US Secretary of State John Kerry all renewed the invitation several times, but Rousseff has doggedly refused, and Obama has still not issued a personal apology, or indeed even considered such an apology necessary. If he had, he could have easily done it shortly after the fact at the 2013 G20 meeting in St Petersburg. Another chance to approach one another came at this year's summit in Australia.

Neither friend nor enemy

Traditionally, the relationship between the two countries has been good, if not particularly strong. "Brazil has always viewed the US hegemony skeptically," Matthew Taylor, political researcher at American University in Washington, DC, told the BBC recently. The problems are much more deeply rooted than any personal animosities.

The relationship blossomed for a short period during the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-2001), who threw his support behind the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), a proposal that came from President George H. W. Bush. This was quickly cut short by Cardoso's successor Lula da Silva, who - along with other Latin American heads of state - condemned the plan as another tool of US domination. Brazil's complaint to the World Trade Organization against US cottons subsidies did the rest, although larger diplomatic complications never came to pass.

The two largest economies in the Americas remain far removed from any free trade agreement. Juan Carlos Hildalgo, Latin American analyst from the CATO Institute in Washington, offers this to consider: "In her first term, Dilma Rousseff focused even more than her predecessor da

Silva on South-South cooperation." And when it comes to the North, a relationship with the European Union is more important than the United States.

Altogether, the EU is Brazil's most important trade partner, accounting for more than one fifth of Brazil's foreign trade. China and the US follow with around one-sixth of foreign trade combined.

Brazil's share of US trade on the other hand is well below three percent. For the United States, the development of relations with the EU and China has priority over partnerships in the Americas.

Mutual disinterest

But the US and Brazil are planning a visa deal to ease entry from both sides. And Obama has recently showed more interest in Latin America. Yet more pressing questions are plaguing both leaders: Obama's forces are in demand in Syria and Ukraine. At home he is fighting to secure his legacy against a Republican-dominated Congress. And Dilma Rousseff is heavily involved in the after-effects of her reelection in late October: She must put together a new cabinet with which [to lead her country out of the economic doldrums.](#)

Now, the two leaders have had to face each other at the G20 summit in Australia. Obama had already congratulated Rousseff on her reelection, and expressed his desire to meet her in Brisbane. "There will be polite exchanges, but certainly no substantial strides in relations," hypothesized Marcos Troyjo, leader of the BRIC lab at Columbia University in New York.

Political scientist Paz Neves also doesn't hold out much hope for rapid convergence: "In the White House, there are approximately two state receptions per year. Rousseff isn't going to get another invitation so quickly."

But if anyone is supposed to make a move, says Paz Neves, it's the Brazilian president who should give a sign: "The ball is clearly in Dilma Rousseff's court."