

With eye on Asia, U.S. seeks greater global security role for Brazil

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Last week's inaugural U.S.-Brazilian Defense Cooperation Dialogue was the latest example of the Obama administration's efforts to enhance defense cooperation with Brazil. Though improving broader relations with Brazil has been a priority for the Obama administration, the U.S. emphasis on bilateral defense ties should also be seen as part of Washington's ongoing effort to get Brazil to increase its global security profile as the U.S. focuses more of its strategic attention and shrinking defense resources on the Western Pacific.

Even before announcing the U.S. pivot to Asia last fall, the Obama administration had actively pursued expanded security ties with Brazil. The two countries signed a defense cooperation agreement in April 2010 and another agreement the following November to facilitate information-sharing. Both agreements have already resulted in greater military-to-military cooperation, at times in new domains. Although the U.S.-Brazilian navies have a long history of cooperation, most recently jointly participating in a maritime security exercise near Africa in February, cooperation between their air forces is a relatively new phenomenon. In 2010, the U.S. Air Force participated in Brazil's annual Cruzex multinational air exercise for the first time. Next year, Brazil will reciprocate by joining the annual multilateral Red Flag exercise in Nevada.

Since the Asia pivot, however, the Obama administration's efforts have taken on a greater urgency. The White House dispatched Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey to Brasilia last March to further expand military-to-military ties. It has also been urging Congress to loosen restrictions on technology transfers to Brazil. The bilateral Defense Cooperation Dialogue was subsequently publicly unveiled during Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's trip to Washington last month. The first meeting of the new initiative took place April 24, during the Brazilian leg of U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's weeklong trip to Latin America.

During his two-day visit, Panetta repeatedly called on Brazil to increase its role in global security. Washington's interest in such an expanded Brazilian role stems from its need to increase its force posture in Asia while reducing overall defense spending. Brazil can help facilitate this shift in two ways.

First, the U.S. will need to increase its arms sales if it hopes to maintain its defense industrial base in the face of its own budgetary constraints. Brazil's robust economic growth and responsible global track record make it an attractive defense customer from Washington's perspective. Brazil's GDP in current dollars grew from \$558 billion in 2000 to \$1.78 trillion in 2010, a roughly 220 percent increase over the decade. Brazil is also wealthy relative to other large rising powers. As the world's fifth-most-populous country, its GDP per capita is nearly equal to China and India's combined.

Brazil is already looking to purchase 36 multirole combat aircraft at a cost of \$4 billion to \$7 billion. The U.S.-based Boeing Corporation's F/A-18 Super Hornet is competing with the French Rafale and Swedish Gripen for the contract. With Brazil's decision expected in the coming weeks, Panetta wasn't bashful in pushing for the Super Hornet during his trip, stating, "With the Super Hornet, Brazil's defense and aviation industries would be able to transform their partnerships with U.S. companies and . . . plug into worldwide markets."

Second, by expanding its participation in international security operations, Brazil can help free up U.S. forces for the Western Pacific. The most obvious roles for the Brazilian military are in hemispheric security and patrolling the Atlantic Ocean. The latter is especially crucial as Washington stations more of its shrinking fleet in the Pacific.

Interestingly, last week Panetta also said the U.S. wants Brazil to play a larger role in training African security forces. While the defense secretary justified this on the basis of Brazil's historical ties to Africa -- Brazil was the largest destination of the Atlantic Slave Trade -- the main driver of U.S. policy is its pivot to Asia. Since the attacks of Sept. 11, U.S. Marines have

taken the lead in training African partner nations for counterterrorism operations. With the U.S. looking to station more of its Marines in Asia, even as terrorist groups flourish in Africa, Washington needs others to perform this role. Once again, the Obama administration sees Brazil as a viable candidate.

Unfortunately, Washington is likely to be disappointed. Despite its great-power ambitions, Brazil's insular geography will limit its propensity to take on a large role in international security. It is flanked by the Atlantic Ocean on its eastern seaboard, while the vast majority of its inland borders are impenetrable due to the Amazon Jungle and Andes Mountains. These natural barriers simultaneously protect Brazil and constrain its ability to project power outward. Even along its more amenable southwestern border, no salient security threats exist. In contrast to Brazil's impressive rise, its historical regional rival, Argentina, has not kept pace, especially in the years following Argentina's sovereign debt default. Although Argentina has begun to reverse this trend in recent years, it is still a long ways away from posing a threat to Brazil. In any event, historically prickly relations between the two have gradually improved over the past several decades as regional integration efforts such as Mercosur and UNASUR have taken shape.

Without this external security threat or the ability to project power by land, Brazil's role in global security will remain limited. Brazil's leaders may seek a modest naval buildup, especially in light of the recently discovered "Pre-Salt" offshore oil reserves, but their primary concerns will be expanding the country's diplomatic stature and tackling the internal problems that threaten continued economic growth.

As Washington encourages Brazil to enhance its global security role, U.S. policymakers should recognize these limitations and manage their expectations accordingly. Above all, the Obama administration must avoid letting disagreements with Brazil on security issues detract from the overall promising trajectory of the bilateral relationship.

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