

Noref Guest Writer Articles

Brazil – A “Secure” Partner for the European Union?

Wolf Grabendorff

Summary

Brazil’s increasing regional and international role has transformed it in a very attractive partner for the EU. Since the US appears reluctant to get involved in crisis management in Latin America, Brazil has been identified as the pillar of South American stability. However its recent record on regional conflict management has revealed a policy profile which is more “southern” than “western” and does not always coincide with the European world view. There are a number of promising possibilities for security dialogue and cooperation with Brazil, but its insistence upon defining pragmatically its own priorities has to be reckoned with.

Brazil is not only a future energy giant but is also assuming a major role in a changing international system. President Lula has ordered a substantial quantity of hardware for its armed forces, and his recent military agreement with France is the largest ever concluded by a South American country. It reflects not only Brazil’s aim to be seen as a global player economically, but also its position as a military power of regional importance.

The country’s long-established claim to catch up rapidly in all modern technologies has now been demonstrated in the security field. There can be little doubt that the agreement with France is unusual because of that country’s willingness to share its military and nuclear submarine technology with Brazil, which the United States was not willing to do to the same extent.

Strategic EU partnership

In 2007, the EU established a strategic partnership with Brazil and the ambitious Brazil-European Union Strategic Partnership - Joint Action Plan, in place until 2011, mentions first and foremost the intention of both partners, “to promote peace and comprehensive security through an effective multilateral system”. Promoting human rights and democracy and upholding international justice are among their joint intentions, as well as promoting disarmament, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, conflict prevention, crisis management and peace building and, of course, fighting terrorism and organized crime. The catalogue of possible fields of security cooperation is very wide but it focusses on common multilateral positions and appears not to

Wolf Grabendorff, German political scientist and consultant specializing in Latin American international and security relations. Former Director of the Institute for European-Latin American Relations (IRELA) in Madrid and of the Program for Regional Security Cooperation of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation in Santiago de Chile. Visiting Professor at various universities in Europe and the US.

consider possible bilateral activities and mutual expectations that might arise in relation to security perceptions and actions on either side.

Given the current US administration’s reluctance to involve itself in crisis and conflict management in South America, the EU views Brazil as the regional power capable of stabilising an increasingly fragmented region. It has therefore called Brazil “the pillar of South American stability”, projecting its own European concept of regional stability onto a half continent composed of societies in transformation which, by definition, will be very hard to stabilize. Taking into account the record of President Lula’s capable and increasingly active regional policy, it can by no means be assumed that “common values” are shaping regional crisis management as exercised by Brazil. In 2004 Brazil’s leading role in establishing and managing the humanitarian mission in Haiti through Minustah was seen by the EU and the US as a sign of willingness to demonstrate political responsibility in security issues. However, many other bilateral and multilateral activities undertaken by Brazil since then have not met with the outspoken approval of the established powers, indicating conceptual and functional differences over Brazil’s role as a regional power.

Shaping regional policy

There are five bilateral cases which seem to prove the “southern” orientation of Brazil’s foreign policy projection under Lula, although increasing domestic debate in Brazil about its current foreign policy profile appears to indicate that a future change of government might reverse that course. All five bilateral cases in Brazil’s regional policy are under crisis observation by the Obama Administration. In Bolivia, Brazil stepped in after the withdrawal of the US Drug Enforcement Agency; in Cuba, Lula has lobbied hard for a softening of US positions; in Colombia, Brazil has made very clear its opposition to foreign troops using military bases in South America; in Honduras, Brazil not only called for a strong united regional front against the military involvement in the ousting of a democratically elected president, but in addition played an important role in the clandestine return and protection of the deposed president; and also, last not least, in the case of Venezuela, Lula has opted for collaboration with a quite difficult president, perceived by the US and the EU as the principal “troublemaker” in the region. In all five cases, Brazil’s form of conflict management has demonstrated a different concept – and in some cases outcome – than the EU might have wished for.

There are many obvious reasons for the specific shape of Brazil’s foreign and security policy, in general, and that of its current government in particular. One could mention the peaceful tradition of a continent-like country, which borders on all but two South American states; its regional leadership ambitions and broad economic interests, which Brazil sees as more likely to result on a South-South than on a North-South axis; its commitment to multilateralism in the global context and its equal insistence on bilateralism in its own region. Given these foreign policy experiences with Brazil, the EU should be cautious about imposing “western standards” on Brazil’s future role as a regional stability anchor and global ally in security issues.

Its appetite for more military might and the refusal to sign an improved safeguards protocol in the context of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty could be interpreted as worrisome for advancing common goals in the EU-Brazil strategic alliance. Not only that, Brazilian reluctance to speak out for the improvement of human rights in the Geneva multilateral discussions, and some of its prominent South-South relations - China, Cuba and Iran come to mind – could also give rise to concern. The treatment of actual or future allies serves as an indicator for common interests, but creates difficulties in the process of defining common security threats, upon which all future security cooperation must be based.

Regional security initiatives

The need for the EU to distinguish between the style and content of Brazil’s new international role should not obscure the scope for future security cooperation. On the multilateral level Brazil has promoted the founding of two promising intergovernmental institutions in the context of Unasur – the South American Defence Council and the South American Council for Fighting Drug Trafficking, although this might have a negative effect upon the already diminishing role of the OAS in the region. Both regional institutions are still in an infant stage but could serve as ideal platforms for security cooperation between the EU and South America, thereby also extending legitimacy to the joint action program of the EU-Brazil strategic partnership. Specifically in relation to fighting drug trafficking, the original idea of multilateralizing efforts, which have been carried out until now mainly by the US Drug Enforcement Agency, could possibly be realized using this new institutional framework. Brazil’s willingness to help Bolivia with that enormous task could become a pilot project in which the EU would certainly be welcome to participate given its long and rich experience of a regional cooperation very different in scope and impact to the centralized US organization.

The agenda of the South American Defence Council also offers a number of opportunities for long-term cooperation. The need to strengthen confidence building instruments is all the more pressing, given the much discussed fear of a “cold war” in the region. The experience of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) with all types of Confidence Building Measures (CBM) could be shared with the South American Defense Council to pursue the multilateralization of the many existing and often quite successful bilateral experiences. Europe’s rather unsuccessful efforts to find a regional Defence identity – another of the South American Defense Council’s aims – could also serve as a sensitive topic for meaningful biregional security dialogue.

Costs and benefits

To establish a security partnership with Brazil, the EU will have to consider, at each step, the effect of its increasing involvement with this new global actor upon third parties. Without doubt the country most effected in its “own hemisphere” by the rise of Brazil is the US, which is actively seeking to strengthen its own ties, mainly in economic and, especially, energy relations. Given the historic military ties of the US with Brazil – even more so than with other Latin American countries – a stronger EU - Brazilian security partnership will not be taken lightly by the US, and might have some unwelcome impact upon the transatlantic relationship. By using Brazil as a bridge to South America in security issues, the EU will also have to prepare itself for disappointment and criticism from other countries in Latin America where the recognition of Brazil as the accepted regional leader is still rather distant - not to mention those South American countries, such as Venezuela and Colombia, which have different security perceptions and do not share Brazil’s concept of conflict management. Additionally a preferential treatment of Brazil in security issues in the context of the BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India and China – might carry political costs on both sides, especially since Brazil under Lula seems to be more interested in strengthening BRIC connections than EU relations.

Strategic relations crossing the North-South divide imply costs and benefits for both sides. For the EU, a strong reliable security partner in a region of increasing economic and political importance to Europe is highly attractive and consequently Brazil appears to meet all the necessary criteria. What remains doubtful is the assumed “common world view” on both sides, since Brazil’s rise as a mayor global player will doubtless reinforce the already existing variances in its foreign and

security policy priorities. Future security cooperation between the EU and/or its member states with Brazil will have to take into account not only different perceptions about common threats and adequate policies and instruments to meet them, but also the time-honored pragmatism of Brazil’s overall foreign policy stance, as well as the lack of domestic consensus about its current foreign policy profile within Latin America.