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U.S.–Brazil Summit Must Address Differences on Democracy, Human Rights, and Iran

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On April 9, President Obama welcomes Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's first female president, to the White House for an official visit. The White House hopes to showcase a strong, reliable partnership with Brazil. It will focus attention on a broad range of low-cost soft power initiatives aimed at education, technology, energy, research, and economic cooperation, while leaving on the margins tough issues, such as democracy promotion, human rights, and Iran. During the Rousseff visit, President Obama should highlight the growing importance of Brazil as an international power, advance existing initiatives, and outline a roadmap for critical diplomatic and security cooperation.

Recognize Rising Brazil

Undoubtedly, Brazil commands increasing influence in Washington.

It possesses demographic clout (nearly 200 million), economic power (a gross domestic product of almost \$1.6 trillion), expanding prosperity, and continent-sized territory and resources. This year Brazil overtook the United Kingdom—the Industrial Revolution's home—as the world's sixth-largest economy. Brazil is the world's fourth-largest food exporter and an energy giant of enormous potential. Brazil, Canada, and Mexico are the next three big-league players in the Western Hemisphere. The Obama Administration needs to highlight this central fact to the American people.

Current Policy Overly Focused on Soft Power

The Obama Administration stresses shared commonalities—diversity of populations, cultural vibrancy, innovative societies, and presumably similar political values. The Administration has placed strong emphasis on a potpourri of low-cost soft power initiatives, dialogues, and partnerships. It proposes to support these initiatives; however, the State Department budget for Brazil will shrink from \$23 million in fiscal year (FY) 2011 to \$6 million in FY 2013. It should be noted that this amount is less than one-third of

the proposed aid to anti-American Bolivia. Much of the work in following through with the current policy therefore falls on the private sector, public institutions, and nongovernmental bodies.

The list of undertakings runs from the Joint Action Plan on the Promotion of Racial and Ethnic Equality, initiated during the Bush Administration in 2008, to recent efforts such as 100,000 Strong in the Americas, an education exchange program, and increased support for Brazil's innovative Science without Borders effort. Overall, the continuity between the Bush and Obama Administrations is substantial. Former Assistant Secretary of State Tom Shannon (2005–2009), serving now as U.S. Ambassador to Brazil (since 2009), has been a driving force behind U.S. efforts to command the soft power high ground.

Key Differences on Democracy, Human Rights, and Iran

The 2010 National Security Strategy called for the U.S. and Brazil “to move beyond dated North–South divisions” and build a “new architecture of global cooperation.” The Administration underestimates the friction between U.S. national

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interests and values and the arrival of new powers. Not all aspects of the U.S.–Brazil relationship are win-win.

Democracy. In 2001, the U.S. and Brazil signed the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice observed that “the Democratic Charter must become the core of a principled, effective multilateralism for the Americas. Together, we must insist that leaders who are elected democratically have a responsibility to govern democratically.” Differences between Brazil and the U.S. over recent events in Honduras and the challenges to democratic governance in Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela merit serious review of the democratic norms enshrined in the Democratic Charter. Without Brazil’s commitment to an effective Organization of American States (OAS) and other inter-American bodies, multilateral efforts to protect democracy and human rights will continue to diminish.

Human Rights. Brazil’s former President Lula da Silva was dismissive of the 2009 Green Movement protest in Iran and of dissent and opposition in totalitarian Cuba. During a January 2012 visit to Cuba, President Rousseff delivered a major package of economic assistance to the regime but declined to reach out to dissidents. A victim of torture and imprisonment under a military regime, Rousseff argued that human rights should not become “a political or ideological weapon.”

Brazil argues that it achieves greater moral authority by not pointing fingers and sticking to “quiet diplomacy.” It prefers cumbersome mechanisms like the U.N.’s Universal

Periodic Reviews to high-level peer pressure and sees U.S. democracy promotion as interventionist and often hypocritical. Democracy promotion is not on Brazil’s foreign policy agenda. It is, however, vital to the principles and values of U.S. foreign policy.

Iran. Brazil’s rise has awakened interest in the Middle East. With 10 million citizens of Middle Eastern descent, Brazil has increased its involvement in the turbulent region. It has recognized Palestinian statehood. Its relations with Iran primarily follow a commercial track—Brazil is Iran’s most important trading partner in the Americas. Brazil has shown a willingness to consider Iran a developing, victimized nation with a legitimate right to a nuclear program, fighting to free itself from unfair U.S. and Western European pressures.

In May 2010, President Lula joined Iran and Turkey in an agreement to swap Iranian uranium for enrichment abroad, a move they believed might head off tougher U.N. sanctions. Brazil then voted against tougher anti-proliferation restrictions. Brazil has been more circumspect since 2010, and relations appear to have cooled somewhat between Tehran and Brasilia. Yet, by appearing to side with Iran and head off what it views as an Iraq-like scenario, Brazil might actually embolden Iran to pursue its nuclear weapons ambition.

President Obama Needs to Raise These Issues

President Obama cannot impose U.S. views on Brazil. He must rely on the diplomacy of persuasion and a

conviction that while opinions differ, U.S. interests and values matter and need to be considered.

- **Venezuela.** A polarized Venezuela may represent a powder keg. The U.S. and Brazil need to work in tandem to prevent continuing democratic erosion and potential instability. Pressing for an OAS electoral observation mission for the October presidential elections would be a start.
- **Cuba.** Days after Pope Benedict XVI called for an open Cuba, President Obama must reiterate the imperative for true respect for human rights and a democratic pathway to the future as the Castro regime withers.
- **Iran.** Dozens of soft power initiatives will not counteract harm done to U.S. national interests and international security if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon.

U.S.–Brazil relations are broad and deepening. The level of U.S. comfort with Brazil’s rise will significantly improve if Americans are confident that our two nations stand together on the vital issues of the day, such as advancing liberal democracy in the Americas, recognizing the universality of human rights, and preventing a nuclear holocaust in the Middle East.

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